

On the Boundary Between Light and Shadow

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In which Gensokyo, a hidden land of illusion and fantasy, is thrust into the harsh reality of a new land Outside.

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Chapter 1

On the Boundary Between Light and Shadow

It was dangerous, she knew, to wander around in a hidden village. Not just because of their distance from the mountain that served as her home - the closest one still took several days' travel to get there, and bandits waiting to prey on unwary travelers were not an uncommon sight - but also because of the people who inhabited it. The hidden villages were filled with ninja, the type of humans most likely to detect her presence, after all, and if she were discovered, the consequences would no doubt be... dire.

Still, there was something which drew her back to the places again and again. Perhaps it was because of the scenery - her home did not have any counterpart for the twisted forests and craggy mountains that surrounded some of the villages she had visited. Perhaps it was the people. Her homeland boasted only a village of middling size, after all, surrounded by scattered farmsteads. Perhaps it was because of the aura of violence and despair that seemed to permeate the villages which she visited. Or perhaps it was so that she could, if only for a short while, leave behind her reputation as a bringer of unfortunate events.

But regardless of the reasons why she was there, Kagiyama Hina sat on top of the four carved stone faces that overlooked the village and gathered misfortune, slowly but steadily accumulating a pile of the small paper boats and dolls that she used to disperse the ill luck that persistently dogged her footsteps. She had entered the village without much fuss early in the morning, claiming to be a civilian visiting the city, and had, after purchasing a large quantity of paper squares, traveled to the vantage point and begun her work. The repetitive motions were calming in their own way. She had long since ingrained the motions into her mind, and she folded the boats effortlessly.

By the early afternoon, she had run out of paper, and she stood and gathered up the small boats, carefully placing them into a basket she had brought along with her, satisfied with her work for the day. After she stowed these away in the room she had rented at one of the travelers' inns that dotted the town, she would go and buy some food before coming back to this vantage point and spend the rest of the day sitting in quiet...

A voice jolted her out of her thoughts. "Hey there!"

She started, very nearly upending the basket onto the grass. A young boy with pale blonde hair waved to her from the far side of the monument. He smiled brightly at her and ran over, moving surprisingly quickly for a child his age. Hina sighed, before smiling back and returning the gesture. It was rare for her to have any human contact, both because of her reputation and the taboos against associating with her, and also because of her own decisions to avoid the company of others. Even though associating with this child for a while shouldn't lead to any lasting consequences, especially since she'd already finished folding the boats for today, she would have preferred if he'd stayed away, if only because she could not ensure that none of her influence would linger around him.

Still, it could be relaxing to have some human company once in a while, if only for the different perspectives the people she met could offer. Besides, this was a child. There wasn't anything she could really *do* to him, right?

"I haven't seen you around before," the boy said excitedly.

Hina smiled again. The child's happiness was almost infectious, and it was hard to resist being caught up by his cheerfulness. "I doubt you would have," she said quietly. "I don't live in Konoha, and I'll be leaving soon once my business here is done."

The child frowned, scrunching up his face. "If you're not from Konoha," he asked slowly, "then where are you actually from?"

"That," Hina said, poking the kid on the nose, "is a secret." She giggled a bit as the child squawked indignantly. "In any case," Hina said, collecting her things, "I really should be going." She looked down at the village below. "Nice meeting you, kid." She had barely begun walking away when she heard a shout from behind her, and turned to look. The boy was running after her, waving as he followed her down the path she had been taking.

"Wait!" he shouted. Hina stopped and waited. The boy ran up to her and looked up at her, almost pleadingly. "Can I come with you? I won't get in your way, I promise!"

Hina blinked. It was rare that anyone would willingly follow her. She looked at her basket full of dolls, then at the boy, then back at the basket. "All right," she said, grudgingly. "If you really want to, I guess you can follow me." The boy let out a loud cheer, and Hina smiled faintly. It was good to see that at least one person could be happy when in her presence.

Based on her previous, if limited, experience dealing with young children, Hina half-expected the boy following her to incessantly ask questions about anything and everything she did. It was with a great deal of surprise, then, that she discovered that the boy kept his word to the letter, choosing to trail her at a distance instead of sticking to her side. Still, if the child was intelligent enough to keep his promise to her, she was hardly one to complain.

Her business in the village did not take long to conduct. Most of the things she purchased were items that she would be hard-pressed to find back at her home: high quality paper, a selection of steel knives, some fine porcelain dolls, and some children's primers and other textbooks that Keine would no doubt be interested in.

As she wandered around the city, visiting the shops which might sell items of interest to her, Hina quickly noticed that the townsfolk seemed to treat her with a sort of quiet sympathy. It wasn't until she dropped off her purchases at the inn, though, that she discovered

why. By that time, she had finished shopping, it was already late afternoon, and she could feel herself steadily getting hungrier. Sparing a glance at the child who was still stubbornly following her, she began to look for some sort of food. There were plenty of vendors hawking their wares on Konoha's streets. What to buy, then? Yakitori, perhaps? She looked at the nearest stand, which did, in fact, sell grilled chicken skewers. The last few times she had bought the stuff in the human village, usually from Mokou, it hadn't been bad.

She looked back at the kid who was still stubbornly following her, this time waiting half-concealed behind a trash can, and then walked up to the cart, ordering two portions of yakitori. The young man working the stand nodded at her pleasantly, and soon, the street was filled with the pleasant smell of grilling meat. "So," the man said, as he worked, "what brings you to Konoha?"

"Business," she said quietly, "business and travel. There are some items available here that are both much more difficult to find in smaller cities and much more reasonably priced here. The scenery helps as well, I suppose. Konoha is a beautiful place."

"I figured you weren't from around here," the man said, "considering you haven't noticed the village troublemaker following you around."

"Troublemaker?" Hina asked, with a frown. "I met that boy while I was sightseeing earlier this morning. He's seemed nice enough so far, and I haven't seen any reason to drive him away."

The storekeeper shook his head. "That kid's bad for business," he said dryly. "He's always running around causing some sort of disruption, not to mention the fact that a good deal of the populace seems to dislike him. I'm not surprised, to be honest. He has this habit of causing property damage - nothing major, of course, and usually it's not anything that a fresh coat of paint can't fix, but it's still quite irritating to wake up one day and discover that your storefront has been covered in bright orange paint." The man sighed. "And it doesn't help that the Hokage seems to like him for some reason. It

seems like he never really receives any real punishment for any of his antics."

"Is that so?" Hina asked. "What about his parents?"

He shook his head. "I *think* he's an orphan, but no one knows for sure. The only people who know are the ninja, and they sure as hell aren't telling anyone anything - the last time any of us civilians asked about him, we were told in no uncertain terms to leave the matter alone." The man grimaced a bit before smoothing his face into a calm smile. "But enough about that kid. How long are you staying in Konoha, miss?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning," she replied. "It's several days' journey to my home, and I want to put some distance between myself and the city before night falls."

"I see. Well, I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Konoha, and I wish you a safe journey." He leaned over towards her, placing two full wooden boxes on the counter. "And be careful. There's rumors that groups of bandits have begun to raid merchant caravans in the area. A lone traveler like you would be a perfect target."

Hina nodded, taking her food. "Thanks for your concern," she said, "but I can take care of myself." She looked back to the street, where the kid was *still* standing behind the trash can that he'd hidden himself behind when she first came to the stand. "Well, I suppose I should be going, now. Thanks for the food."

"Thank you for your patronage. Hopefully I'll see you around in the future, miss."

Food in hand, Hina made her way back to her former vantage point overlooking the city. The trip back was uneventful, all things told, and, before long, she had settled back down in the grassy clearing where she had sat making her dolls earlier that morning. Placing the two boxes of food down on the grass, she waved the child over. He

bounded over with all of the enthusiasm of a small child before finally skidding to a halt in front of her.

"Sit down," she said, pointing at the second box of food. "That one's yours." The kid sat down almost instantly, before glancing at her, looking confused.

"For me?" he asked. "Really?"

She nodded. "Really. You should hurry up and eat it - it'll get cold soon."

The boy looked at the box, at her, and then back at the box. "Thank you very much for the food!" he said. And with that, he fell upon the proffered food and devoured it. Hina watched, mildly impressed. She'd barely even begun eating by the time that the young child polished off his bento.

"You know," she said, after he'd finished eating, "I never got your name."

"Um!" the boy said. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto! Future ninja of Konoha!"

Hina blinked. "Uzumaki... Naruto," she repeated. It sounded suspiciously similar to the name of someone she had heard mentioned in passing before. There were always rumors floating around of some incident or another that the Hakurei Maiden had solved. Most, of course, were quickly disproven, but there had been one remarkably persistent story regarding a violation of the spellcard rules and an expedition to the deepest reaches of the sea, which was still spoken of even now, nearly four years after she'd first heard it. And of the many names which had been associated with that story, one had stuck out to her - Uzushima Naruko, youkai of whirlpools. And even if the similarity in names was almost certainly coincidental, it was still surprising to hear something which reminded her so much of events at home.

"Well, then, Naruto-kun," she said, finally, "why did you want to follow me around today?" She frowned a bit. "You're not planning to pull some sort of prank on me, are you?"

Naruto shook his head frantically. "That's not it at all!"

"Well? Why did you want to follow me, then?"

The kid gulped, looking for all the world like Aya when someone caught her in a place that she had no right being in. She stared at him for a long moment, and watched as the boy struggled to decide what to say. "You were nice to me," he admitted, sounding embarrassed.

"Nice?" Hina asked, confused. She didn't remember doing anything particularly remarkable earlier that morning, nothing that warranted such interest, at any rate.

Naruto nodded. "Yeah," he said quietly. "You didn't yell at me to go away or ignore me like the rest of the villagers do."

It seemed at the shopkeeper's suspicions had been correct, then. This Naruto was definitely an orphan, and judging from his response, likely had no one to take care of him, either. She could certainly understand his motivations in latching on to the first person he perceived to be friendly. She herself was not a stranger to the crushing melancholy that loneliness could bring, and unlike her, and while she had some few friends who either could ward off the misfortune that she brought with her or simply didn't care about the bad luck, Naruto likely did not have anyone to talk to at all. Still, it really wasn't her problem; no matter how much sympathy she had for the kid, there was absolutely nothing she could do to improve his situation.

"What's your name?"

The boy's question jolted her out of her thoughts.

"Ah," she murmured. "I haven't introduced myself, have I? I am Kagiyama Hina." She smiled at him. "Pleased to meet you, Naruto-kun."

Naruto blushed a bit. "Pleased to meet you too, Hina-san," he parroted. Hina smiled again, and nodded at his words, waiting for him to say something else. After a moment of silence, it became clear that he wasn't going to say anything else, so she turned back to her food, instead. Naruto stayed silent, watching her eat, finally speaking up after she finished. "Hey," he said, "Hina-san, what were those dolls you were making earlier?"

"The dolls? They're called nagashi-bina," she explained. "A lot of the time, I make them using more expensive materials, but paper is the only thing that I can really get cheaply. And as for why I make them... It is a ritual of sorts, and I've made them long enough that it's become a habit."

The boy scrunched up his face a little. "I don't like them at all," he declared. He carefully looked at Hina, who frowned a bit. "I mean," he hastily amended, "they're pretty and all, but..."

"No, that's quite all right. They're used in a ritual of cleansing, to carry away peoples' impurity and misfortune. I'm not surprised that you found them a little unnerving. Everyone does, really."

"You're not mad at me?"

Hina shook her head. "Why would I be?"

Naruto smiled happily and hugged her. She froze for a moment at the contact, and then slowly let her arms wrap around the little boy's back. "I think you're pretty too, Hina-san," Naruto said. "And you smell nice."

She laughed a bit at that. "Thank you," Hina said quietly. Naruto only hugged her tighter in response. When he finally let go, she grimaced at the thin but noticeable aura of misfortune the boy had somehow

acquired. She had dallied far too long, and now that she was no longer focused on the child, she could feel the impurity which she collected slowly becoming more and more concentrated. Apparently, it had once again reached the point where it could affect the humans she associated with. And while the child was unlikely to notice any misfortune dogging his footsteps for now, if she stayed any longer, no doubt Naruto would find himself followed persistently by bad luck for quite some time.

"What's wrong?" Naruto asked.

Hina sighed, making a show of looking at the position of the sun. "It's going to get dark soon," she told him, "and I should probably get going now. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning, after all, and I want to be well-rested for the journey. Besides, you should probably be going to sleep soon, as well."

Naruto looked downcast. "Can't you stay a bit longer?" he begged. "Please?"

She hesitated a moment, looking at the young boy, who seemed to be close to tears. "I'm sorry," she said softly, "but I really do have to go now. I'll visit again in the future, though, and I'll look for you whenever I'm in town."

He looked at her intently. "You promise?"

Hina nodded. "I promise," she said, with all the conviction she could muster. Despite that, Naruto still looked uncertain. Hina sighed again. She really did have to leave - it would be better for everyone, after all, but simply abandoning the boy like that left a bad taste in her mouth. She looked at the boy again. "Here," she said, slowly unwinding the red and white ribbon wrapped around her left wrist, "this is for you. It's a good luck charm. Keep it safe, all right?" She drained away the misfortune it had accrued from her contact with it and handed it to Naruto, who clutched it tightly to his chest.

"I'll keep it safe for you, Hina-san" he declared, "and I'll give it back to you when you visit again. That's a promise!"

She smiled softly. "Keep it," she said. "It's yours now. You can probably make better use of it than I can. Good bye for now, Naruto-kun. We'll meet again!" And with that, she walked away, waving over her shoulder as she left, leaving behind a young boy and a ribbon on the mountaintop and taking a strange feeling of happiness with her. Perhaps, she thought, as she left the next morning, she should visit places like these more often. All in all, it had been a most satisfying experience.

Judging from the amount of bandits who accosted travelers wandering between the elemental countries, crime was still commonplace despite the prevalence of ninja. There were several theories as to why. Keine had written some sort of thesis on the topic, relating it to income inequality and social instability. On the other hand, Aya had published an article in her newspaper speculating that the hidden villages encouraged the activities as a means to increase their own revenue.

Unfortunately, no matter which theory was correct, there still were bandits who roamed around looting merchant caravans and taking hostages. More importantly, there were still bandits who could interfere with her duties. Evidently, there were quite a few of them as well, judging from the group of twenty or so armed humans who had seen fit to accost her. It reminded her of her grandfather's stories about the outside world, back when he had been a young swordsman sworn to the service of the Saigyouji clan. The sight was a sobering reminder that the new world that she had to adapt to was, in many ways, completely different from the world which she had lived in for so long.

Youmu sighed, and let her hand fall to the hilt of the katana she kept strapped to her waist. "Look," she said. "Let me pass, and no one has to get hurt."

The leader of the group of men shook his head, and brandished the cudgel he held in his hand in what could possibly pass for an attempt at cowing her into submission. "No can do, missy. Now hand over all the money you have and those two swords you've got there, and we'll let you go without any hassle." The man smirked. "And if you don't, well... I can't really stop these guys from doing some more unsavory things once they get their hands on you."

"Humans," she muttered. Even though Reimu had quite explicitly stated that the spellcard restrictions need not apply when dealing with humans from the new outside world, she still didn't enjoy using her full powers on some otherwise helpless humans. It reminded her too much of darker days, of the times before the Hakurei shrine maiden had instituted the restrictions which prevented unnecessary loss of life, when she had, more often than not, resorted to force to resolve disputes.

The bandit coughed, and slapped his club into the palm of his hand a few times. "Well?" he asked. "What'll it be? I don't have all day here."

"I see that I have no choice," Youmu said.

"All right then. Hand over the swords first, and..."

She *moved*, disappearing from his sight and reappearing behind him in an instant, her sword already drawn from its scabbard and held in a guard position. "Sword Skill," Youmu intoned. "Flashing Cherry Blossoms." Dozens of pinkish-white slashes followed her path, and the corpse of the bandits' leader slumped to the ground. She looked around at the other bandits, who had collectively taken a step away from her. "Does anyone else intend to die today?" They fled, leaving the rapidly cooling corpse of their former leader behind.

Youmu sighed again, wiping off the thin sheen of blood that coated her blade with a handkerchief before ramming it back into its sheath with what was perhaps an unnecessary amount of force. The metallic smell of fresh blood was yet another reminder of days long past. It was unpleasant enough that she was sorely tempted to

simply leave, but her sense of decency demanded that she do something, anything, about the body in the road. It took only a few minutes to drag the corpse into the thickets by the side of the dirt path and kick some dirt over the dark patch of drying blood that indicated where the body had lain.

Those few minutes, however, were apparently enough for someone to notice and attempt to sneak up behind her, judging from the faint sounds of cloth rubbing on cloth. She laid her hand back on the hilt of her katana. "Who goes there?"

A man in the green flak vest that seemed to be standard for ninja from this area dropped out of a tree behind her, and she whirled around to face him. "Foreign kunoichi," he demanded, "identify yourself and your purpose here."

"I am Konpaku Youmu," she said, "here to establish diplomatic relations with your village."

The ninja seemed a bit taken aback at her statement, but if anything in her simple statement had disturbed him in some fashion, he hid it well. "Very well, then," he said, walking slowly towards her, pulling a small wooden chit out of one of the many pouches on his vest and holding it out to her. She accepted it from him and tucked it into a pocket. "You may proceed down this road to Konoha. Do not lose that chip - it is a guarantee of safe passage, and if you are spotted near the village without it, there will be unpleasant consequences."

And with that, he dashed away without a single question regarding the dead body by the side of the road, jumping up into the treetops and quickly disappearing from sight. There were a few more rustles from the trees surrounding her, indicating that the ninja's comrades had left as well.

She shook her head. What a strange place, indeed.

Youmu flexed her hands nervously. In all honesty, she hadn't really wanted to take this job, not when it involved leaving Yuyuko-sama to fend for herself for so long, but when Reimu had carefully explained to her that everyone else qualified to do it was either busy dealing with the repercussions of the transition between worlds or busy keeping the youkai in check, she had acquiesced. Still, even the very thought of it was strange. Her? A diplomat? But, it seemed, for better or for worse, that she was to represent her home on unfamiliar grounds.

The remainder of her trip to this "Konohagakure" had been relatively uneventful, all things told. It hadn't taken her very long at all to arrive at the gates of the place, which, despite its claims of being a "hidden village", was more of a city than a village, and not particularly hidden, all things told. The police manning the gates had waved her along without a second glance, once she'd presented the chit and explained her purpose there, and from there, a few simple questions had directed her to the tall tower overlooking the rest of the city. When she'd arrived at the tower and announced her presence, the secretary manning the desk had informed her that "the Hokage will be with you shortly." And since then, she'd sat down in a lounge and waited, and waited, and waited...

To be honest, it wasn't the waiting that bothered her. There were any number of reasons that might necessitate putting off an unscheduled meeting with an envoy from an otherwise unknown nation, after all, any number of domestic crises that she might not know about. Besides, she hardly had a reason to complain - it wasn't as if Yukari-sama would ever be prompt if she could help it. Nor was it the unfamiliar, chafing weight of the metallic headband neatly affixed to her upper left arm, something which Sanae and the others had insisted that she wear on her person at all times. No, if anything, her annoyance stemmed from the other person in the room, a young, dark-haired teenager who kept on sneaking glances at her, or, perhaps, more precisely, the two swords she carried strapped across her back. Evidently, from the metal band tied across his forehead, he was a ninja. Clearly not much of one, though, considering the ease

with which she could identify the cause of his inordinate curiosity, though she supposed that some allowances had to be made, considering his young age.

"You know," she said finally, after about half an hour of idly watching the ninja failing miserably at his attempts to hide his staring, "you aren't very good at this whole subtlety thing."

The kid blushed. "They're beautiful," he said.

"So you aspire to be a swordsman?" Youmu asked. The boy nodded silently. "That's a good dream, kid," she said slowly, "but it is one that will take a lot of hard work to achieve." After that incident with the Taoists, the last she had been publicly involved in, a group of children in the human village had idolized her, declaring their intention to become swordsmen, "just like Konpaku-san." After a while of them bugging her to give them lessons whenever she went shopping, she'd agreed to teach them a little of what she knew. None of the children had shown up past the fourth lesson. Knowing how to wield a sword was not simply a matter of poking with the sharp end, and very few had the determination, or the time, for that matter, to learn the nuances of swordplay.

"Hey!" the boy snapped. "Who are you calling a kid? You can't be that much older than me!"

She blinked. Wasn't it obvious that she was... Oh. "Whatever you say," she muttered.

The kid grumbled a bit under his breath. "Say," he said, after a moment, sounding hopeful. "Could you teach me, then? You look like you know what you're doing."

Youmu stared at him. "Are you sure you're supposed to be a ninja, kid?"

He jerked his head in a nod and held up a hand, pointing at himself with his thumb. "Of course!" he said. "Gekko Hayate, chuunin."

"I see. In that case, are you sure you're allowed to seek instruction from a foreigner?" Youmu tapped her fingernail on the headband on her arm in a series of sharp clicks, and Hayate's face slowly turned pale, and then flushed a brilliant scarlet as he took in the three unbroken lines of the qian trigram scored across its surface.

The Hokage's secretary walked in at that moment, saving the boy from any further embarrassment. "The Hokage will see you now," she announced.

Youmu nodded and stood up, walking through the large double doors and into the Hokage's office without a second glance.

The office itself was roughly what she had expected. A low desk, piled high with papers, all four walls covered in bookcases filled with dozens of tomes and scrolls, and a pair of large windows which overlooked the village off to one side. Granted, some of the details were different - a brush and a block of ink sat on the desk in lieu of one of the self-inking pens which were in abundant supply at Rinnosuke's shop - but, overall, it would not have been out of place at, say, Eirin's clinic. As for the man sitting behind the desk, though, that was a different story.

From the obsession that the people of this world had with strength, she had expected the military leader of a ninja village to be some sort of man, young enough to be in the prime of his life, yet at the same time old enough to have the experience necessary to manage a large organization. Instead, the man sitting behind the desk was someone who should have been spending time with grandchildren, rather than managing military affairs. It was surprising, and also impressive. To remain the leader of a ninja village, even at this age, no doubt took a great deal of skill, especially in a society which seemed to take the opinion that strength mattered above all else.

The doors closed behind her soundlessly, and the old man behind the desk stood. "Greetings, Konpaku Youmu," he said gravely. "I am Sarutobi Hiruzen, Sandaime Hokage of Konohagakure, and it is my honor welcome you to my fine village."

She bowed to him. "Thank you, Hokage-dono," she said. "I am honored to be here." She straightened up, and was surprised to see that the Hokage had returned the gesture.

"So," he said kindly. "What brings you here today, Konpaku-san? And from a previously unknown village, no less?" The grandfatherly air the Hokage exuded was overpowering, and Youmu had to remind herself that it was likely only a front. This man standing in front of her was someone who had kept his position, not through brute force, but rather, through finesse. No, the impression that she got from him was almost certainly false, and she would do well to remember that.

"I am here to formally request an opening of diplomatic relations between our two villages." She took a deep breath. "In addition, I have been permitted to negotiate economic treaties within certain parameters."

"And your village?" Youmu froze. "It would be rather inconvenient to negotiate with you or any other representative of your village when I do not know its name, no?"

Her face burned in embarrassment. "Kekkaigakure," she said. "I am here on behalf of Kekkaigakure, sir." The Village Hidden in the Boundary. The idea for the name, patterned off of that of the ninja villages which studded the continent, had initially come from Margatroid, of all people. Still, it was remarkably appropriate, and it had quickly caught on. Yukari-sama, of course, had been quite amused once she learned of the traditional titles held by the leaders of each village.

"I see," the Hokage said. "Well, it does not behoove me to force a guest to the negotiating table, not when she has just arrived from distant lands. You will, of course, be provided with accommodations here for as long as necessary. If you would like, we can begin discussions tomorrow. However, considering the limited powers invested in you, I believe that it may be more prudent to meet with your leader face-to-face instead."

She nodded, relieved. "That would be preferable." Letting Yukari-sama deal with the negotiations would be much better than performing a task which she had no real training and very little preparation for.

"In that case, then..." The Hokage looked over his desk, selecting a thin scroll from among the many papers on his desk and handing it to her. "This is a formal invitation to your leader, whoever he may be, to meet with me here to discuss the terms of our... coexistence."

Youmu nodded again. "Thank you very much," she said, bowing again. "By your leave?"

The Hokage bowed again in response. "My secretary will make temporary arrangements for you, if you so wish." He smiled. "I hope you enjoy your stay here in Konoha."

Sarutobi Hiruzen, Sandaime Hokage, sighed as the girl left. To think that someone this young would be sent alone into unknown territory... He himself would have been uncomfortable doing such a mission without at least a full team as an escort, even in his youth. Just what kind of a place was this Kekkaigakure, that they would resort to such measures? "Well, Jiraiya?" he asked to a corner of his office. "First impressions?"

The air in front of a bookshelf shimmered, and the ninja in question stretched a bit as he stood from where he had been crouching during that exchange. "Nice figure," he said. "A bit young, though. Overall, I'd give her a-

"Jiraiya!" he snapped.

"Sorry, sorry. She seems genuine. Judging from the way she carried herself and the swords, likely a close combat specialist. Possible kekkai genkai as well, if that hazy cloud floating around her head is anything to go by. The girl wasn't particularly suited to the job. You could see how relieved she looked when she found out that she

didn't actually have to do any negotiation." He laughed a bit. "But besides that?" He shrugged. "This Kekkaigakure is probably extremely low on manpower, if they'd send someone like her to speak with you. And alone, no less."

"And the seals?"

"Do you really doubt my skills that much, sensei?" Jiraiya sighed at his stare. "All taken care of," he said, finally. "And she didn't seem to notice, either."

Hiruzen sighed, and sat back down. "Track her when she leaves. Discreetly, of course. Something like this... it has the potential to destabilize the balance of power, and at the very least, I want to make sure that we know where potential enemies might originate from."

Jiraiya nodded. "Of course."

"Dismissed." Hiruzen sighed again after Jiraiya left. He really was getting to old for this.

Chapter 2

On the Boundary Between Light and Shadow

The girl Jiraiya was tasked to follow made straight for the northern border of Fire Country as soon as she left Konoha. In the four days it took her to reach the border, Jiraiya was a farmer, a vagabond, a merchant, and a mercenary for hire. Taking on so many identities was perhaps a bit excessive, especially considering the distance at which he was trailing his target. Still, it couldn't hurt to be careful. There was always a chance, after all, that he might be discovered, and he would rather not risk discovery due to taking unnecessary risks, much less from failing to follow proper procedures with regards to surveillance.

Trailing her proved rather unfruitful, however, almost to the point that it was boring, to be honest. Apart from confirming that the girl was indeed proficient in kenjutsu, from an encounter with a singularly unfortunate bandit, there was little else to find out. Still, he kept at his task, shadowing this "Youmu" as she quickly made her way north. Her schedule, from what Jiraiya could discern, was almost mechanical in its rigidness. Breakfast and basic sword katas of an unknown style in the morning, followed by travel until sunset, broken only by a short halt for lunch. At night, dinner and a repeat of the katas from the morning.

Despite the long days of travel, however, the girl displayed no outward signs of fatigue. It was quite impressive. To continuously travel on foot for over fourteen hours a day without resting for any notable period of time was no mean feat. He doubted that he himself had the capability to travel so far so quickly - he certainly would not have been able to at her age, at least. That the girl could do so indicated that she had, at some point, gone through a truly enormous amount of physical conditioning.

On the fifth day of his observance, however, something remarkable occurred. They had crossed over the border from Fire Country the day before, late in the afternoon, the lush forests common to his home transitioning first into an expanse of flat, level grassland and then into a series of rolling hills. In the morning, the girl had followed the routine that she had set down, eating quickly and taking some time to repeat the by now familiar katas before hurrying along on her path north. Sometime before noon, though, she suddenly stopped in her tracks as if crossing some sort of invisible line.

Jiraiya ducked down under the crest of a hill, cursing under his breath as she slowly scrutinized her surroundings. Something he did, apparently, had drawn the girl's suspicion, and now he would have to proceed even more carefully than before. Perhaps his disguise had slipped somehow? He sighed, peering back down the hill where the girl stood. If she confronted him about it, today he was Kaneshiro Takeru, struggling trader, on his way to visit the few subsistence farmers who eked out a living farming the poor, rocky soil of the unclaimed land between Rice and Waterfall. But no, she hadn't seemed to take notice of him at all, and now she was...

He blinked, and rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Yes, the subject of his surveillance had apparently just risen up from the ground and flown away without any apparent means of doing so. For a while, he stood there, staring up into the sky, looking after the girl's rapidly disappearing figure. Flight, while not entirely unheard of, always involved some sort of aid, whether from Fuuton jutsu and large fans to catch the wind or from summoned birds. But this type of flight that the girl had just displayed - this was unprecedented.

Jiraiya sighed, and slowly shook his head before biting his thumb and slamming the hand on the ground. A small puff of white smoke heralded the arrival of a messenger toad. Hiruzen needed to hear about this, and *now*.

Kekkaikagure was much as she had left it. The Hakurei Shrine stood on top of a tall hill at the center of a slowly expanding ring of half-

constructed buildings, and while a handful of workers from the human village were there, slowly working on completing work on various buildings, the place still felt deserted. Unlike in the human village in Gensokyo itself, no one truly lived here - while a few families had expressed interest in moving to the village still being constructed in the outside world, none of the buildings slated to be part of the residential district had yet been completed, and, unless priorities drastically shifted, none would be completed for quite some time. As it was, the empty, unlit buildings loomed over her in the fading sunlight, she shivered. Walking through empty, unlit streets, whether in Kekkaikagure or elsewhere had always made her feel a bit uneasy, and...

"Shameimaru-san," Youmu snapped, her voice echoing off of the empty shells of the buildings around her. "How long have you been following me?"

"Not long," came the reply from above. Shameimaru Aya, "journalist" and prominent member of the tengu clan on the mountain, vaulted off of a roof and landed in front of her, a fan in the shape of a maple leaf in one hand and her ever-present camera in the other. "I only really started once you got in the village limits. Gotta make sure you're not someone *hostile* or anything, right?" She grinned, pointing towards the center of the village. "Anyway, we didn't really expect you to get back so quickly, but if you hurry, you might be able to catch our great and glorious leader before she heads back for the day. Come on, I'll take you there."

Youmu glared at her. "I am perfectly capable of finding my own way to the Shrine," she said, a bit stiffly. "There's no need to follow me there. At any rate, shouldn't you get back to patrolling?"

The tengu waved her hand dismissively. "The others can take care of it," she said. "I'm not the *only* one on patrol duty, ya know? 'Sides, I want to hear about this place you visited." She leaned over, putting her arm around Youmu's back, slinging it over her shoulder. "Konoha-somethingorother, was it?"

"Konohakagure," Youmu replied tersely, slowly levering Aya's arm off of her shoulder. "And no, it was not that remarkable, compared to the cities in the outside world. Well, the original outside world, at any rate. And could you possibly get your arm *off* of me?"

"Sorry, sorry." The apology was not particularly convincing, and Aya was still a bit too close for comfort, but it would have to do. "So how'd the trip go?"

"There were lots of bandits," Youmu grumbled, staring down at the ground. "I frightened most of them off, but some felt fortunate whenever they encountered me. They were not. I must say, though, that it seems strange that I encountered any bandits in the first place, given that I encountered some sort of border guard almost immediately after driving off one particularly lar..." Aya nodded absently, making a vague noise of agreement. Youmu looked at her. The tengu had somehow managed to produce a pen and notepad from somewhere on her person, and was scribbling frantically, half-listening to what she was saying. She sighed. "Do you always have that with you?"

Aya nodded again. "Yeah," she said, pen held to her lips. "It kinda comes with the job description, ya know. And now that I'm officially in charge of surveying and reconnaissance and a bunch of other stuff, it's even more important that I have this with me, since I'm supposed to debrief anyone who comes back after leaving the village. Well, I'm not the only one who's supposed to do that, but hey. I'm here now, right?" She frowned a bit, studying whatever it was that she had written on the page. "Did the guard give you any sort of pass?" she asked.

"Debrief?" Youmu asked.

"Well, basically I'm supposed to interview everyone who comes back into the village about their experiences outside. The more we learn about the nature of these hidden villages, the better we can coexist besides them. And answer the question, please."

"Yes, he did," Youmu confirmed. "A painted wooden chip, small enough that I could easily keep it in a pocket."

The scribbling resumed. "Any markings on it? On either side?"

"The symbol of the village was displayed prominently on both sides. If there were any others, I did not see them."

"Hmm. And what happened afterward?"

Thankfully, Aya seemed to be running out topics to inquire after by the time that the two of them arrived at the Shrine on foot, the veritable torrent of questions slowly dying down to a small trickle. The constant interruptions as Youmu recounted the details of her fairly uneventful trip were rather irritating, especially since most of the questions were almost entirely about minor details - about things she hadn't bothered to take note of, especially regarding the behavior of the ninja she had seen. Still, she put up with it, despite her personal misgivings. Despite her annoyance, it wasn't hard to figure out how information like that could be important, and she resolved to be more aware the next time she left the Barrier.

Still, it was somewhat relieving to find herself walking up the long set of stone stairs towards the torii, an elegant wooden gate which marked the division between the main body of the village and the Shrine itself. By the time that they were halfway up the stairs, Aya had finally stopped asking questions, and the two of them walked up in companionable silence. Normally, she would have flown up, but there was something that stopped her from doing so, some sort of strange feeling that she couldn't quite identify.

At the top of the stairs, a short, stone paved walkway led to the main building of the Hakurei Shrine. It was a small complex of buildings - the shrine and the attendant shed sat at the terminus of the paved path, a simple wooden donation box displayed prominently inside, while a separate building served as Hakurei Reimu's place of residence. The feeling she'd had intensified then, and, as she

passed through the open gate, it hit her. There was something sacred about making the journey up to the Shrine.

Traditionally, the torii marked the transition between the sacred and the profane. It demarcated the boundary between the impure world of humanity and the consecrated ground of the shrine. And in much the same way, the Hakurei Shrine itself marked the border between the outside world and Gensokyo itself. Initially, Youmu had assumed that the name 'Kekkaikagure' had been a joke, referring to Yukari-sama's abilities. In this context, though... Seeing as how all of Gensokyo was hidden within the boundary designated by the Shrine, it truly was a "Village Hidden in the Border."

"Home," she muttered under her breath.

"You haven't been outside much, have you?" Aya asked.

Youmu shook her head.

"I lived here," Aya said, gesturing around at the shrine, "long before Gensokyo even existed." She smiled. "I remember the days when Yakumo Yukari was just some crazy youkai living out in the middle of a forest. I've traveled all over Japan, and I admit - the outside world is a wonderful place. They have simple things, things like tap water, public transportation, and electricity that make life much, much easier. Still, though, the place that we live in is truly special. It always has been special, and it always will be - after all, this is my home, and nothing can ever change that. Remember that. It doesn't matter if you live in Eientei or Mayohiga or Hakugyokuro or wherever. Gensokyo is home. Our home." The tengu clapped her on the back and headed back down the stairs. "See you around, okay?" she called. "And tell Yukari that I'll have the report done by tomorrow afternoon!"

Youmu nodded, stunned, as Aya ran halfway down the set of steps and leaped up into the air, quickly disappearing into the distance. She stood there for a long moment, thinking about what Aya had said.

Her home, the place where she lived, was Hakugyokurou, the White Jade Palace in the Netherworld. It was where she was born and raised, and she knew every inch of it, from the many beautiful gardens which she maintained to the withered cherry tree which sat in a place of pride in the central courtyard. And before, that had been all she'd needed to know. Why did being from Gensokyo matter, when the phrase 'Gensokyo' encompassed the entirety of the world she knew?

Now, though, things were different. She could reasonably be expected to leave the world inside the Barrier for extended periods of time, like she had just done. And no matter how poorly she might get along with some of the others who lived alongside her, they still shared a common home. The Shrine, Myouren Temple, all of it was *home*, even if she didn't live there. Now, with an actively hostile outside world, the exact place that she came from did not matter - only that she was from Gensokyo itself. That, no doubt, was the point that Aya had been trying to make.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I'm home." And with that, she finally turned around and headed towards the shrine.

Unsurprisingly, the shrine itself was deserted. None of the few people who visited Reimu on a routine basis usually came by this late in the day, and it was exceedingly unlikely that anyone from outside would be here. The outbuilding that Reimu lived in, however, was brightly lit, and judging from the faint sounds of conversation which drifted out from inside and the soft yellow emanating from the paper windows, there were quite a few people occupying it at the moment.

Youmu walked up to the door and rapped sharply on the frame. The sounds from inside continued unabated. Youmu sighed and knocked again, more insistently this time. There was still no response. For a moment, she considered simply leaving and coming back in the morning. The message she carried, though, was important enough that Yukari-sama would be displeased if she were not informed of

her return in a timely manner, to say the least. Youmu muttered a quiet apology under her breath, and opened the door.

Yukari-sama had apparently left already, as Aya had warned might happen, but Reimu and two other humans she knew only in passing were still present, sitting around a low table covered in papers, in the middle of a loud conversation. The shrine maiden looked over as the door opened, half-rising from her seat. "Konpaku-san!" she greeted, stuffing the pair of ofuda that she had drawn back into her shirt. "You're back! We weren't expecting you this early. Did the negotiations go well?"

Youmu shrugged. "The leader of the village was content to arrange for a future meeting with Yukari-sama," she replied, pulling out the scroll. "This is supposed to be a writ of safe passage through the lands of Fire Country." She laid it on the table and sat down between Reimu and one of the two others, a light-haired shopkeeper who, unlike most of his peers, dealt with items gathered from Outside.

"There doesn't seem to be anything obviously wrong with this," Reimu said, unrolling the scroll and laying it flat on the table. "Something about this feels off, though. I think..."

The man next to her frowned. "This is a device which grants its holder limited safety," he announced, after examining the piece of paper for a moment, "and it also contains a component which allows a third party to identify this scroll's location and distance from them."

"Well, I can't say we didn't expect something like this. It's not like it matters that much in the long run, anyway." Reimu sighed, rolling up the scroll, which disappeared quickly into her voluminous sleeves. "I'll give this to Yukari tomorrow. She'll know what to do with it."

As he continued traveling north, following the directions from the tracking seal that he'd carefully hidden in the scroll that his old teacher had given to the foreign emissary, the hills Jiraiya had been traveling through slowly turned into mountains, tall rocky

outcroppings of bare stone capped in snow and ice jutting out from the dense vegetation of the forests in its valleys. Thankfully, the sheer amount of plant life made it fairly easy for him to conceal his movements, although, at the same time, the need for absolute secrecy slowed him down greatly.

As far as he'd known, no one lived this far north, mostly due to the inhospitability of the dense forest and the distance from any major population centers, and he doubted that his previous identity as a merchant would serve any use here. Indeed, up until this point, none of the three nations bordering this patch of land had bothered claiming it. As it was, due to Fire Country's sheer size, the daimyo had severe difficulty in governing the remote northern reaches of his nation, and neither Rice nor Waterfall would accept any incursion into what was unofficially a buffer zone between the two nations.

The entire region was, by and large, an unknown. Initial surveys had been made, of course, and at great expense, but in the end it had been concluded that there was no major benefit in developing the region. As such, it was a relatively low priority to Konoha, which had other, more pressing problems to deal with. Still, something didn't quite add up. The most recent annual reconnaissance mission had been made seven months ago, and the squad assigned to the task had reported that nothing was out of the ordinary.

Furthermore, despite his best efforts, he hadn't managed to identify anything from among the many intelligence reports he'd received in the past year that even hinted at the formation of a new village. No bulk shipments of building materials, no reports of population migration, nothing. That something this large had slipped past his intelligence network was worrisome. If he'd somehow managed to miss *this*, what did that say about the more subtle day-to-day business that he was supposed to keep track of?

For now, though, there was nothing to do but continue ever northwards. Despite the help with concealment, the dense undergrowth proved to be as much of a hindrance as it was a benefit. Foliage reduced his range of vision significantly, not to

mention the fact that the wide area topographical maps that he relied on did not mark obstacles such as fallen trees or deep ravines, all of which impeded his progress. Still, Jiraiya made fairly good time, jumping from tree to tree where he could, and dashing along the ground where he could not. Even as he approached closer and closer to the place where the scroll was kept, there were no signs of human habitation in the forest around him, no smell of smoke or the myriad scents on the wind, no visible patrols of ninja to evade, no clear paths that traders could follow to ship in materials in short supply. This trip, it seemed, was raising far more questions than it answered

It took him five days to find the village, five days of travel through dense forests, struggling to maintain the correct course. Still, in the end, he'd succeeded, and soon enough, he found himself at the edge of the forest, looking out at a roughly circular clear-cut area several kilometers in diameter. The village itself was not much to look at - a small cluster of half-finished buildings surrounded some sort of shrine on a hill. It was nowhere near as large as Konoha was, considering that the entire cleared area could easily fit within the confines of the Forest of Death alone several times over.

Simply judging from the size of the village, his earlier judgment about manpower seemed to have been correct. This place most likely would not prove to be a threat, given its minuscule size. Furthermore, considering its isolated location, contractors for missions would be few and far between, and, in the end, this Kekkaigakure most likely would end up similar to the Land of Rain under Hanzo's rule. As it was, Amegakure, the village he ruled, was impoverished and wracked by internal divisions, due to both the depredations inflicted upon it during the Second Shinobi War and Hanzo's attempts at achieving complete autarky. At this point, it had been relegated to being a minor nuisance at best, notable only for the fact that it had turned out a ninja as exceptional as Hanzo, who, based on Jiraiya's estimates, would be the last ninja of close to that caliber to come out of Ame in the immediate future.

What was concerning, though, was the complete lack of residents. Despite the aid of his chakra enhanced vision, he could not find any residents inside the village. Apart from some construction workers, the entire place was deserted, as far as he could tell. There were no guards, no residents, and most importantly, no ninja, not even the girl who he'd followed here from Konoha, which meant either that he'd been lead to the wrong place, which was unlikely, given the nature of the tracking seals, or that there were other facilities hidden nearby, underground or elsewhere, that he'd missed. Neither option was at all palatable.

Moreover, his previously thought-out plans on how to infiltrate a hidden village had all been rendered useless. There was nothing here to infiltrate, unlike what he'd expected, and the fact that the forest surrounding the village had been cleared mean that he would have little to no cover if he wanted to somehow sneak in.

Jiraiya sighed, tentatively marking the spot where the shrine stood on his map with a large question mark. For a moment, he was sorely tempted to investigate the village in greater detail, but the risk of detection made any such actions foolhardy at best. Even if it seemed that the girl he'd been trailing before hadn't detected his presence, there was no guarantee that there weren't other tracking teams who could find him, or for that matter, that she had not been pretending to not notice him trailing her. Perhaps later, if this 'village' eventually became populated, he might make an attempt at infiltration, but for now, there was nothing he could do. By and large, Kekkaigakure remained a mystery, and he had uncovered very little about the village itself that he had not already suspected. By any reasonable measure, his mission here had ended in failure.

He stuck around for a few more days, unsuccessfully trying to ferret out any hidden bases, before leaving, disgruntled with just how little he'd found out. It seemed that he'd raised more questions than he'd answered during this little expedition.

And as he sped south, back towards Konoha, he wondered. Every night, the workers would head to the shrine, leaving the next morning

with armloads of building materials and no small amount of food. But just where did all of this come from? No matter how extensive the assumed storage space under the shrine might be, he doubted that there would be enough provisions to continuously feed everyone at the village for any extended period of time, not with the amount of building materials which had to be stored there. As far as he could tell, however, none of the workers seemed worried about food, and no farms had been set up in the vicinity. And just how had they gotten all of that iron, anyway? There were only three corporations that traded extensively in ores and processed metals, and none of the discrepancies in the routine shipments of iron and iron ore could be linked to this place.

Nothing about this place made any sense *at all* .

Yakumo Yukari, mistress of boundaries, nominal leader of Kekkaigakure, glared at the crowded room. She understood the necessity of holding council meetings - she had called this one herself, upon Youmu's return - but the sheer amount of time it took for everyone to arrive and settle down was still irritating. So, instead of doing something productive such as making sure that the Hakurei Barrier properly isolated Gensokyo from the outside world or discussing defensive plans with the tengu, she sat here, staring balefully at everyone else.

There was at least one representative from almost every major faction in Gensokyo present. Really, the only people missing were... She twitched as the door behind her slid open and Yasaka Kanako marched in, followed closely by an embarrassed-looking Kawashiro Nitori.

"You're late," Yukari snapped as Kanako sat down beside her. "What kept you?"

"Kawashiro-san wanted my advice on the nature of the devices that we might want to export," she said unapologetically. "I don't know if you've gotten a copy of the results from the last geological survey

that the tengu conducted, but the region of land immediately surrounding the area enclosed by the Barrier lacks several crucial types of minerals which are also not present within Gensokyo proper. In particular, I believe that, of the minerals that kappa mentioned that they'd need, there aren't any easily accessible bauxite or rare earth deposits. If we want to find sources of these minerals, we'll need something that we can use to trade for raw materials, especially if we want to manufacture firearms and ammunition in any reasonable quantity."

"Well, at least you have a reason," Yukari admitted, grudgingly. "Last time, Suika forgot about the meeting and didn't show up until an hour after we'd given up on waiting for her and began without her." She sighed. "Just... in the future, try to be prompt. We have all been incredibly busy since the transition, and the sooner we can get this meeting finished, the more time we will have to work on other things."

Kanako nodded, and Yukari stood. "Now that everyone is here," she announced, trying to make her voice heard over the general clamor, "we can begin." The room fell silent remarkably quickly, for once, and she continued. "As you all know, about two weeks ago, we agreed to send representatives to the major powers in this region. It seems that our attempts at negotiation have begun to pan out - the leader of Konohagakure, one Sarutobi Hiruzen, has agreed to meet with us to discuss further relations between us and his village."

She sighed. "It appears, however, that in the process, the location of this village has been discovered. While this is hardly unexpected, the manner in which it is discovered is alarming. There is much about this world that we do not yet know. Apparently, the people outside have created some sort of tracking device that functions using a type of sealing that we know nothing of. One such device was embedded in the scroll granting our representatives safe passage through the Land of Fire. I will take this opportunity to remind everyone that any artifacts recovered from outside are to be sent to Kawashiro-san for study. The more we know about the methods these ninja use, the

more likely we will be able to prevent similar occurrences in the future."

She paused here, and smiled before continuing. "In any case, the invitation sent to us permits us five members in our delegation. As discussed before, I will be bringing Morichika Rinnosuke, Yasaka Kanako, Hijiri Byakuren, and Shameimaru Aya along with me as parties to the negotiation. I plan on leaving tomorrow afternoon. If there are no objections?"

There was some amount of discontented grumbling from the crowd, but, thankfully, in the end, no one said anything. The last discussion about who she should bring along with her on diplomatic visits had ended up in a fight between Byakuren and Toyosatomimi no Miko, both of whom had objected quite strenuously to the other's inclusion. In the end, Byakuren had won out, though it had been until several days that the two had managed to speak to each other on civil terms, and even then only with great reluctance.

"Moving on, then. It has been suggested multiple times that bringing along samples of possible trade goods would be prudent for a demonstrative purpose..."

As the meeting dragged on longer and longer and the inevitable bickering started, Yukari groaned, rubbing her forehead in an attempt to stave off the upcoming headache. While it was nice to see that everyone would defer to her final decision, the constant arguments over minutia not even worth debating were draining, and the sheer amount of work required to keep the discussions on topic and stop people from sniping at each other did not do anything to improve her mood.

Still, in the end, she had decided upon a list goals to aim for and concessions that could be made that was at least acceptable to everyone present. Hopefully, whoever she met with in Konoha would be easier to deal with. At least there, she wouldn't have to deal with Kanako getting into a shouting match with Reimu over something entirely irrelevant.

"I don't like this," the old man said. "I don't like this one whit. Are you sure, Hiruzen, that this is the best course of action?"

The Hokage looked out across his village through the windows in his office and away from his old teammate's questioning stare. "No, Homura" he said wearily. "I am not. But we cannot afford to make even more enemies, not when Konoha still has not recovered from the losses sustained during the Third War, much less the Kyuubi attack."

"And the solution is to allow five foreigners into Konoha? I've seen the profiles that the tracking teams have generated. One civilian, accompanied by four shinobi with unknown abilities and unknown motivations. This is far too risky. Three years ago, Kumo managed to cause an inordinate amount of chaos with just *one* envoy."

"Security procedures with regards to visiting dignitaries have been revised since then." He grimaced. "And even if something of a similar nature were to occur, Jiraiya's reports indicate that Kekkaigakure is a small village, without any sort of political leverage. We know that they've envoys to Kumo, Iwa, and Kiri so far, and no doubt Suna will be receiving a visit soon. As far as we can determine, their desire for peace is genuine."

Mitokado Homura grunted. "Perhaps," he said. "But the timing of their visit is rather suspicious, what with the trouble we're having with the Uchiha."

"Are you suggesting," Hiruzen snapped, "that the Uchiha clan is conspiring with the ninja of a hidden village that no one had even heard of a month ago?"

The councilor shook his head. "Merely pointing out that this is not a convenient time for us to be holding meetings with a foreign power, no matter how small it might be. This is the third time that you've had to reschedule a meeting with Fugaku, and I fear that he may be getting impatient."

Hiruzen sighed. Uchiha Fugaku had been raising trouble ever since the incident with Orochimaru, demanding increased powers and funding for the Military Police force that he headed and aggressively expanding its size. He had also stalled when asked to open up the police force to outsiders, citing security concerns. And while it was a valid excuse, considering that the police kept tabs on all of Konoha's active-duty ninja, Fugaku's unwillingness to compromise on even the most important issues made dealing with him difficult, even at the best of times. The visiting delegation from Kekkaigakure was, according to the data from the tracking seals, due to arrive around noon, and the following meetings no doubt would take quite a bit of time. Unfortunately, postponing his meeting with Fugaku would only give the man more excuses to cause trouble, but he would just have to wait.

Jiraiya's reports on Kekkaigakure had been remarkably incomplete, all things told. No real estimate of manpower, no listing of capabilities of known kekkai genkai, no information on notable ninja aligned with the village. The only real information that he'd gotten from the trip was the location of an under-construction facility that might or might not have been the village proper, and the fact that several members of the village had access to either a jutsu or a kekkai genkai that allowed unaided flight. If the reports hadn't been delivered by Jiraiya's signature toads, Hiruzen would have suspected that Jiraiya had been compromised somehow - while Jiraiya had certainly had his share of failures, this was the first time that he'd failed this badly at information gathering. The lack of information was concerning. If even Jiraiya had been unable to discover anything of import, what did that say about Kekkaigakure's counter-intelligence capabilities?

Hiruzen sighed again as he saw what he had been waiting for, and turned away from the window. "It is far too late to back out now," he said quietly. "Our guests will be at the gate soon, and I must be there to greet them. Homura, if you could gather Koharu and the others?" And with that, he left, making his way to the western gate, smiling grimly.

Konoha had only one tentative ally: Suna. His village was beset on all sides by enemies - much of northern Fire Country bordered on potentially hostile territory, and if anyone caught wind of the internal turmoil, it was entirely possible that Konoha's old enemies would seize the opportunity. If Jiraiya was correct about Kekkaigakure's location, and he could handle the negotiations properly...

Konoha needed an ally in the north, someone who could stall the combined forces of Kumo and Iwa in the event of war long enough for Konoha to send reinforcements to its northern border. And if he had to abandon an ally during wartime to preserve his own village, then that was merely another cost he had to pay, even if it left a bad taste in his mouth. His own feelings were secondary to Konoha's survival, after all - reputation did not matter if your village didn't exist, as drowned Uzushiogakure could attest.

It wouldn't even be hard to secure an alliance. Kekkaigakure would be weak, and small, having just emerged on the world stage, bereft of friends and with enemies on all sides. For the first time in a long while, *he* would be the one with the advantageous position on the negotiating table. Konoha's sheer size guaranteed that it was stronger and had a better economy, and its position directly to Kekkaigakure's south guaranteed that he would be the best option for aid. Yes, surely, the only major problem he would have would be convincing his shinobi forces that such an alliance would be in Konoha's best interests.

And then he met Yakumo Yukari, and all of his carefully-laid plans fell apart.

Chapter 3

On the Boundary Between Light and Shadow

Consider a youkai like Ibuki Suika, the Hakurei Shrine's resident oni. I think we can all agree that she is both extremely strong and extremely proficient in hand-to-hand combat. Hypothetically, then, how many typical humans can she kill if she were to go on a rampage, before dying herself? A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand? No matter how strong she is there is a point beyond which she will become tired to the point that she is physically unable to fight any longer, no matter what her wishes might be.

This is the case for any individual, youkai or otherwise. Anyone can be killed simply through sheer weight of numbers. And while there are the occasional ninja who can claim to be stronger than an average youkai, they are few and far between. How many can a lone ninja kill? How many ninja are there? And how many troops can a daimyo muster, should he choose to call upon his feudal levies and march to war? When a single ninja takes over twelve years to fully train, every single shinobi is an irreplaceable asset, especially considering the extraordinarily high rate of attrition during what passes as peacetime.

Further consider the relative size of the population of ninja to the population of humans who can be conscripted into armies, and the true nature of the relationship of the hidden villages to the countries in which they reside becomes clear. In exchange for defending a daimyo's territories from foreign ninja, a hidden village is permitted the right to base itself within that territory, and, in addition, is accorded some nominal degree of autonomy. This is, in some sense, an unspoken agreement, seeing as no contract outlining these terms appears to exist.

The ninja behave because the daimyo can cut off supplies of food to the hidden village and lay siege with massive numerical superiority -

he can afford to lose fifty men to kill one ninja, after all, not to mention that the spearmen that form the bulk of his troops are far more easily replenished. On the other hand, without a hidden village defending his borders, a daimyo has nothing to defend himself against the poisons and daggers of foreign ninja. In the end, a hidden village simply does not have the numbers to directly confront against a daimyo's forces - Konoha, for example, counts less than three thousand ninja among its forces, whereas the Fire Daimyo has, between his own troops and those of his vassals, a standing army forty thousand strong, not counting the reserves he can call upon - and the daimyo needs the ninja's services to keep his position and his head.

Some might claim that the existence of S-rank ninja, humans capable of annihilating entire armies, nullifies this unspoken accord. They say that the ninja merely suffer the existence of the daimyo, and that no army, no matter how large, can stand up to the might of such an individual. But how many armies can such a human eliminate at once, or in quick succession? One? Ten? Even if the ninja in question is skilled enough and powerful enough that he is capable of wiping out the entire population of a country, there is mental exhaustion to consider as well, not to mention the greedy eyes of the nations across the border waiting for an opportunity to intervene. How long can one man be forced to fight without rest before he collapses? Our position is much the same...

Excerpt from an editorial published in the Bunbunmaru Newspaper,
Volume 139.28

The fan in the woman's hand snapped open with a twitch of her fingers. It was made of white cloth, Hiruzen noted, faintly tinged red, and embroidered with a delicate pattern of butterflies in flight. And when she waved her hand ever so slightly, the thread shimmered and glowed, as if the images were coming to life, about to fly off the cloth of the fan and flutter away on the breeze. He shuddered and

shook his head violently, suddenly distracted from the discussion he'd been having about import taxes and other tariffs.

This was no genjutsu - if it were, the Anbu waiting outside would have long since broken in to defend their Hokage - no, the craftsmanship that went into making that fan was of higher quality than he thought humanly possible. If any of the ladies in the Fire Daimyo's court were to see the fan she held in her hand, no doubt he would soon find himself with a commission to acquire it. That fan was almost certainly worth more than the entire payout from an S-ranked mission. That it was in the hands of someone who was almost certainly a ninja of no small skill was... strange.

It only added to the mystery that he faced in the form of one Yakumo Yukari. Presumably the leader of this delegation, given how all of the paperwork and documents were in her keeping. A woman roughly twenty-five years in age, if his eyes served him correctly, she was hardly one he expected to be leading a village. There was something about her, though, that he could not quite identify, something that made her seem far older than her apparent age. Yes, she, even more so than the others accompanying her, was definitely much, much more than she appeared to be.

Not that any of the other four were easy to read, for that matter. In the few days since the delegation from Kekkaigakure had arrived, Fugaku and Ibiki had jointly prepared four separate intelligence profiles, each of which had almost immediately been rendered obsolete. At times, it seemed as if everything they said or did would force revisions of the profiles, from their apparent lack of elemental jutsu to the strange devices they brought with them as examples of trade goods whose operation could not be explained through any known principle.

Furthermore, the traveling clothes the delegation had been wearing had been of higher quality than he'd ever encountered. It was all pure silk, and of a tighter weave than he had thought possible. The clothes they wore, in any other hands, would have been reserved for the most formal of occasions, if only because of the sheer amount of

craftsmanship that must have gone into their construction. But these people treated such clothing as if they were worth no more than the coarse cotton clothes that the poorest farmer in the Fire Country might wear.

Hiruzen winced, suddenly realizing that he'd gotten distracted again, and forcibly turned his thoughts back to the discussion at hand.

The woman sitting across from him smirked at that, and the fan snapped shut again, quickly disappearing into one of the long sleeves of her strange dress. "Perhaps," she suggested, "it would be for the best if we left this topic for now. It seems that we have a general agreement, and we can leave the details for our assistants. Our job, after all, is to decide general matters of policy, not to determine the precise rate at which foodstuffs should be taxed."

And damn it all, she was right. At some point, he'd gotten far too caught up in trying to worm out certain details about Kekkaigakure during their conversations, losing sight of the true aim of the meetings he was having. He'd focused far too much on the little details of the treaties that were being prepared, even as he sat here, and had nearly forgotten about the big picture. As the Hokage, he was supposed to lay down the overall direction of Konoha's foreign policy, rather than debating about the specific numbers for the taxes to be attached to imported goods.

It certainly didn't help that, once it had been decided to tentatively accept Kekkai's offer for peaceful coexistence and to try to work towards a firmer alliance, he had been busy day and night with meetings, both with the people from Kekkaigakure and with the citizens of his own village. The tedium of the endless meetings and debates had a way of making one lose sight of the true reason that there was a delegation from Kekkaigakure in Konoha in the first place. Changing the topic and spending some time in idle banter would, at the very least, serve to help him keep that in mind when he returned to negotiations.

Hiruzen nodded grudgingly, and Yukari smiled, seeming remarkably pleased with herself. "Very well, then," she said. "Konoha, I am sure, is well-known throughout the Elemental Nations. Should I send agents to the Water Daimyo's court, I will no doubt be able to learn a great deal about your village. Such information, after all, has a way of disseminating, no matter what measures are taken to control its spread. However, as Kekkaigakure is almost entirely unknown, you have no similar methods to learn about my home. As a measure of goodwill, then, if there is anything you would like to ask me, I will answer. Within reason, of course."

At first glance, the offer was remarkably naïve. Simply giving away information about oneself could potentially be deadly, no matter how trivial or inconsequential that information might be. The more he thought about it, though, the more it began to make sense in a convoluted fashion. There was no guarantee that Yukari would tell the truth, after all. She might lie to inflate his estimation of Kekkaigakure's strength, thus giving her an advantage at the negotiating table that she might not have otherwise. She might lie to deflate his estimation of Kekkaigakure's strength, making her home seem like less of a threat to Konoha. For that matter, she might even tell the truth, to make him think that she was lying about it, causing...

He shook his head. That sort of circular reasoning was pointless. In the end, if he could acquire information without giving any away, that would be a net gain for Konoha, and as long as he could corroborate that information with other sources, it was a net gain, no matter what. But what to ask about? It was doubtful that she would give him concrete answers if he asked about things such as kekkai genkai or the number of ninja on active duty. On the other hand, asking about something too general would not be particularly useful, either, as such information would be something that he could easily obtain through other sources.

And so, uncertain about what to ask, he decided to resolve the question that had been foremost in his mind since the day that the initial messenger from Kekkaigakure had arrived. "I understand," he

said, finally, "that there are certain things that you cannot tell me about your village. If you do not mind, though, there is one single question that I would like to ask of you."

Yukari shrugged. "By all means," she said.

Hiruzen nodded. "Why now?" he asked slowly, trying to find the best way to phrase his inquiry. "I do not know when your village was established, or for what purpose, but I think, at this point, anyone can tell that your home has been isolated from the rest of the world for quite some time. Why choose to wait until now to reveal yourselves to the world?"

Yukari pursed her lips, humming thoughtfully to herself. "My people," she said finally, "are extremely isolated from the outside world. We have been for some time. And indeed, if it had been my choice to make, Kekkaigakure would remain unknown to the world." She breathed out in a long sigh. "But our hand was forced. One of the... custodians, for lack of a better word, of our village, whose duty is to guard our home and keep the peace, discovered an intruder who had stumbled upon our home. And when she investigated, this intruder attacked her without warning."

She grimaced, and the fan materialized again from her sleeve. "He was dealt with, although she was gravely injured in the process, and when we sought to discover the source behind the unprovoked attack, we discovered some strange being wrought entirely from imbalance. There was a fight, and, although we killed him in the end, he very nearly succeeded in escaping and revealing the existence of my home to the world. In one day, two men very nearly managed to destroy what I've worked to protect for my entire life. And what if there were more like them?"

"So you ventured out, knowing that, in the process, you would be breaking the protection of the obscurity that your village has held for so long," Hiruzen said. He had dealt with existential threats to Konoha before - if nothing else, the Kyuubi attack certainly counted - and he could understand at least a little of the echoes of a stark,

remembered fear that was reflected in Yukari's voice. "You ventured out," he said, hazarding a guess, "to learn about the world your village had hidden from. To learn how to defend yourselves against an unknown threat, one which might strike again."

Yukari inclined her head towards him. "Just so," she said quietly. "In any case, when we searched the cave that the attacker and his mentor had been living in, in addition to some disturbing things that we destroyed, we discovered a scratched headband bearing a symbol which we now know originates from your village." She looked at him pointedly.

"Missing-nin from Konoha." He tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. While, most of the time, it was understood that the actions that an exile took had nothing to do with the village where the ninja in question had been trained, it was not unheard of for ninja to be ordered to "go rogue" to perform certain sensitive missions. Associating missing-nin with their village of origin was not an unreasonable thing to do, and such an association could very well taint the rest of the negotiations. And if they should prove to bear hostilities towards his home as a result... No. Best not to think of that for now.

"This does, however, bring up something that I had wished to discuss with you, but never found the opportunity to bring up. We do not hold your village responsible for the actions of your exiles," Yukari continued, as if she knew his concerns. "I would hardly be here talking to you otherwise. I believe, though, that among the hidden villages, the practice in these situations is to inform the home village of the identities of the deceased. However, due to our lack of contact with the rest of the world, we have no means to identify the bodies. Thus, I thought it prudent to take records of them and hand them over to you, instead." From somewhere inside her voluminous sleeves, she produced two pieces of paper and placed them on the table, sliding them towards him. No. Not simple paper. Photographs, and ones of higher quality than he had ever seen, at that.

They were of two corpses, both male, laid out on sterile tables and illuminated with the harsh white light of an autopsy room. He almost wished he hadn't looked. Years of experience had inured him to the sight of most typical battlefield injuries. He'd seen the cuts and deep stabs of kunai, the charred flesh left behind by fire jutsu, the telltale signs of certain unpleasant poisons, even the strange effects of some lesser-known kekkai genkai. These injuries, though, were not something he had ever encountered before.

The cause of death for the first was obvious enough - it was hard to miss the marks of some massive, crushing blow to the ribcage that had caved in the entire chest cavity - but both corpses were strangely deformed, flesh and bone melted and warped almost as if they were wax figurines, exposed too closely to an open flame. Large circular puncture wounds from an unknown weapon liberally dotted both bodies, too large to be from senbon, yet, at the same time, the wrong shape for them to be from shuriken or kunai.

The other corpse was equal halves black and white, almost as if it were some child's toy, molded from clay and frivolously colored. It was, for lack of a word, inhuman. Very few kekkai genkai affected the body to such an extent, and while this particular bloodline did not number among the few that he recognized, those that did were, almost universally, extremely powerful. Perhaps Kekkaigakure would make for a decent ally after all, one that might reasonably be expected to make some contributions to war efforts?

And when Hiruzen's gaze drifted up towards the top of the images, slowly but steadily, he found himself looking into the familiar pitch-black eyes of Konoha's most prominent clan. It was a face of a boy, no, man he had thought long dead. He choked and stumbled back in shock, nearly falling over as he half-rose from his sitting position.

"Uchiha," he breathed, righting himself and discreetly waving off his bodyguards in that same motion. "Obito." A young man he had thought long dead years ago.

"I take it," Yukari said calmly, "that you recognize this man?"

He nodded slowly. "Uchiha Obito is a ninja who has been listed as being killed in action for over a decade. The circumstances of his death were, at the time, fairly straightforward. There was an enemy ambush on a mission that he had taken on, and he was buried alive." He had mourned the loss at the time. One more young life snuffed out was one more child who he had failed to protect from the horrors of war. Minato's team had been devastated when they'd finally returned from that ill-fated mission. To learn now that Obito had somehow managed to survive a living burial, and that he had for some reason decided to defect afterward hinted at something more than what he'd gleaned from watching the interactions between him and the rest of his team.

Yukari looked him in the eyes for a moment, fixing him with an inscrutable gaze. He held his breath until she looked away again, apparently satisfied with what she had seen. In that moment, he felt as if he had just passed some invisible test, and he let out a gasp, slumping a little before catching himself. A strange feeling passed through him then. It was not a sensation that he was familiar with at all, and it was not until after the negotiations were over and the delegation from Kekkaigakure had left that Hiruzen realized what it was.

She frightened him. It was not fear of pain or of death or of any number of mundane things. He was a ninja, after all, with no small amount of experience with the typical results of battlefield situations. No, this was something more primal, something on an almost instinctual level that whispered insidiously within the dark recesses of his mind, telling him that *she* was the reason why humans feared the night. It reminded him of the things he had heard in the myths and stories his mother had told him when he was a small child, about the dark days of tumult and conflict before the Sage of the Six Paths had taught the fundamental tenets of chakra theory to the rest of the world. They were fantastic tales of strange creatures, evil and benevolent alike, who had walked the land, inspiring awe and terror in those they had met.

But that was silly. Youkai were just myths, right?

Konoha was not that impressive, not to someone who was intimately familiar with the crowded streets and busy restlessness of metropolitan Tokyo. She'd done her fair share of traveling after the Barrier had gone up, learning as much as she could about the humans that had forced her entire clan to go into hiding and enjoying the heady freedom of the open, unbounded sky while she could. Compared to the hustle and bustle of any modern city, Konohagakure was a small, backwater town. Granted, it was a small, backwater town nearly half as big as Tokyo proper, but without the cars and trains and other vehicles that she'd become accustomed to in her travels, everything seemed so much *slower* in comparison.

But simply wandering off by herself into the city unaccompanied would raise all sorts of alarms, and so she was stuck touring a city under the watchful eye of their two guides, ostensibly clan heads, and almost certainly both ninja assigned to them as watchers. The two Konoha ninja had taken to mostly ignoring them as they walked around, instead choosing to glare at each other in stony silence, speaking only when they had to, either when she or Byakuren posed a question of some sort, or when they reached some notable landmark. Evidently, the two had some sort of deep-seated personal animosity, one that ran deep enough that the only information that she'd managed to get out of them were their names - Hyuuga Hizashi and Uchiha Fugaku.

Still, it wasn't all bad. Byakuren was decent company, once you got past the endless ramblings about the noble eightfold path and spiritual enlightenment and whatnot. She was also surprisingly knowledgeable about philosophy and political science for someone who'd spent over half a millennium sealed away in Makai, and, even if their minders kept them away from the areas containing sensitive operations, at the very least, walking around on the streets gave her some idea of how Konoha actually was like. She was, after all, officially or not, head of - and, so far, only - member of

Kekkaigakure's foreign intelligence division, and so it was up to her to try to compile any and all information that might tell them more about the humans who lived Outside.

There was simply no real alternative to fieldwork, not when it came to acquiring intelligence about foreign lands. While she could simply have done a few high-altitude passes with her camera, that would miss quite a bit of information that could only really be obtained at the street level. There was nothing to be found about the general attitude of the populace in aerial photographs, after all, nothing to let her do more than broadly speculate about the economics of a region, not to mention that an overhead view of the interlocking grid of rectangles that was a city often gave very little information about the function of any single building. So here she was in a foreign city, trying to figure out just where to start in obtaining information on a village that was, for most intents and purposes, a complete unknown. It didn't help that she was restricted to exploring areas that could conceivably house a consulate of some sort.

Still, there was quite a bit that she could learn just by walking around, both about the people and about the world itself. As the few youkai and villagers who'd ventured Outside had attested, Konohagakure relied exclusively on artisans to produce the infrastructure and equipment that it relied upon to maintain its day-to-day operations. Furthermore, despite the apparent existence of ninja techniques that could manipulate the five elements, there had not been any attempts to adapt them to purposes other than war and killing, as evidenced by the lack of electricity and refrigeration facilities. Of course, she was assuming here that what she found here in Konoha would be representative of the other major cities Outside, which might not entirely be the case.

There was more to a village, though, than just technology and living conditions. She had hoped to find out more about Konoha's separate clans on this trip as well - there had been many rumors, but nothing of real substance, and with luck, she would have been able to corroborate some of those rumors with first-hand information.

Unfortunately, their guides' reluctance to speak about much of anything, or at all, for that matter, didn't help at all. To be honest, the choice of two ninja who could not even stand each others' presence to act as as the official face of Konoha seemed strange.

Luckily, Byakuren had come to the rescue, asking to be shown around the various shrines and religious landmarks in and around Konoha. After a moment of deliberation, the stiff, straight-laced man who'd introduced himself earlier as Hyuuga Hiashi had left with Byakuren, leaving her here with Uchiha Fugaku, who seemed much happier now that Hiashi was gone.

"So," she asked, once Byakuren disappeared off into the teeming crowds that flooded the streets at this time of day, "where to next?"

Fugaku shrugged. "We've covered essentially everything on the itinerary at this point, and there really isn't anything else notable to see in Konoha. Is there anywhere in particular that you wanted to visit?"

Aya shook her head. "To be honest," she admitted, "I'm more interested in general information than in sightseeing. We know very little of this world's history, and what records we have are fragmented and unreliable. I'd hoped that you ninja could help fill in some of the major holes in our knowledge about the past."

"The Hokage has not permitted me to divulge such information," came the terse reply.

"It's not like I'm asking you to divulge the deep, dark secrets of your clan or your village, Uchiha-san," she said dryly. "All I'm asking you to tell me about is general history - stuff that anyone would know. Surely you can do that, right?"

The man hesitated for a moment, clearly thinking it over. "I suppose I could do that," he said finally. "What exactly would you like to know about?"

"Everything," she said, taking a moment to savor Fugaku's look of evident surprise. "Tell me as much as you can."

He sighed, and then let out a faint smile. "That is a lot of history to cover, and it is getting late in the day. Perhaps it would be best if we discussed this over some food?"

As head of the Konoha Military Police Force, Uchiha Fugaku was in charge of internal security for the entire city of Konohagakure, with all of the attendant responsibilities and paperwork. As such, when the Hokage had all but ordered him to accompany two members of the diplomatic delegation from Kekkaigakure on a tour of the city, he had, quite understandably, been rather irritated. After all, any amount of time spent gallivanting around in the streets was time he could have used to work on cutting down on the piles of paperwork that permeated every aspect of his job. And while the request had been understandable - as head of the Uchiha clan, he was one of the most influential figures in the village, after all - it hadn't helped that Hyuuga Hiashi had been the *other* person tasked with handling the delegates.

The longstanding rivalry between their two clans had caused the relationship between the two of them to develop into the kind of personal animosity that could only stem from years and years of repeated disagreements. It had not been the kind of request that he could refuse, however, and so he had ended up stuck with the man. As it was, he hadn't been in the best of moods, and the revelation that he would be working with Hiashi, of all people, did not help improve it at all.

And so, when the time came for him to escort the visitors around Konoha, he had not exactly been in a good mood. At least Hiashi seemed to feel the same way, judging from the occasional sulfurous looks that the Hyuuga patriarch occasionally sent him. No doubt, though, it had not made for a good first impression on their visitors at all.

Thankfully, neither of their charges had seemed to be overly bothered. The black-haired woman with the fan who'd introduced herself as Shameimaru Aya had merely glanced at the two of them, looking incredibly amused, before returning to looking at the city, whereas her companion had simply smiled and begun asking questions, ignoring the obvious hostility. Not long after, she'd requested a tour of some religious sites, taking Hiashi with her and effectively removing the cause of conflict.

Then Aya had made her own strange request, which was how he had ended up here in a tea house in the middle of the Uchiha District. At first, when she'd asked him to tell her about the history of the world, he'd thought it was a joke. After all, who didn't know about the Sage of the Six Paths? Such things were, after all, common knowledge, things that were ingrained in his mind even almost before he was born. But... if Konoha had been isolated from the rest of the world for however long, no doubt he'd want to confirm that his histories were still correct.

Not to mention, this was, in fact, an excellent opportunity to attempt to further improve relations with this new village. The Hokage had made it quite clear that he intended to establish a long-term relationship of some kind with Kekkaigakure, and establishing good working relationships with the delegates, people who he'd no doubt have to work with in the future, couldn't hurt.

Besides, it gave him a chance to perform an analysis of his own on his foreign guest. The intelligence profile given him for his mission had been woefully incomplete. There hadn't been anything concrete at all besides the given name, with everything else solely being speculation. It had warned that this Aya might be a skilled Fuuton user, given the fan she seemed to carry on her wherever she went, but that little tidbit of information was not at all near what he'd expected from Jiraiya's vaunted intelligence network.

Still, she didn't exactly carry herself like a ninja, despite the metal plate with the qian trigram that hung at her belt. She looked almost like any other civilian, the way she wandered around seemingly

without any care in the world, with none of the tell-tale nervousness of someone deep in potentially hostile territory without any support whatsoever. It made him nervous. The only ninja who acted that unconcerned were either incredibly experienced or incredibly inexperienced, and the uncertainty was worrisome. Unfortunately, there wasn't really much he could do about it - his orders had left very little room for maneuvering. Here, if only because of lack of evidence, he would just have to guess as to the visitors' intentions.

Fortunately, there still were ways to mitigate the risks. He had taken her to a tea house here for a reason. If anything went wrong, the rest of his clan would be at his side in an instant, ready to beat back the intruders. Of course, the higher quality of the food here didn't hurt, and the fact that all his expenses here would be reimbursed by Konoha, since he was on official business, meant that he wouldn't even have to pay for any of it.

"Thank you taking the time to do this," Aya said, as the waitress arrived with the pot of tea and ceramic cups.

"It is my honor." The waitress poured out the tea and left, and he took a moment to savor the aroma. From the smell, it was from the fields east of Degarashi Port, then - some of the finest tea in the Elemental Nations. "The first thing you should know," Fugaku said slowly, "is that recorded history begins with the Sage of the Six Paths. We have no records of the time before then, save folklore and superstition."

"And no efforts have been made to recover this heritage?"

He shrugged. "Who has the money or the manpower to waste on such things?" He shook his head. "In any case, the Sage brought the knowledge of chakra into this world. Legends say that his descendants eventually founded two clans - the Senju and the Uchiha. At first, after the Sage's death, the ninja who followed his teachings split up, forming clans, often choosing to serve the various daimyo as retainers. At the time, these clans often fought between themselves, vying for the limited supply of work that the daimyo

could provide. One such rivalry was between the Senju and the Uchiha - it was a longstanding rivalry that was only truly resolved upon the founding of Konoha."

Fugaku paused to sip at his tea. Aya, he noted, had produced a notebook and a pencil, and was busy scribbling down notes like a student in an Academy lecture. "After the founding of Konoha," he continued, "other clans founded their own villages, and still others gradually integrated themselves with existing villages. Since then, the three Shinobi World Wars have cemented the hidden villages' place in the world."

"And what of the Daimyo?" Aya asked. "What role do they play, and how much influence do they have?"

It was strange to be able to speak so openly with someone not in his own family. It took him a while, too, to realize why. Usually, even when he spoke to his fellow ninja in Konoha, there was an undercurrent of hidden tension. The Uchiha were widely feared, even within their own village, and it reflected in his interactions with everyone else. It was possible that no one from Kekkaigakure had yet heard of the reputation that the Uchiha clan had, and perhaps the way his guest saw him would change when she found out, but for now, he was content to be able to have someone to talk with, even if it was only for matters of business.

And perhaps, if Konoha ever decided that it was better off without the segment of its populace that it hated and feared and needed, then he might just have somewhere to turn to. It would be difficult to arrange for, especially because of the secrecy under which such negotiations would need to be conducted, but there was promise here. Promise, and possibility.

When the delegation from Kekkaigakure finally left, disappearing over the horizon from where he watched, atop the great gates of Konoha, Sarutobi Hiruzen finally let himself relax. The week that the foreigners had been in his village had been an incredibly stressful

week - there had been security arrangements to make, meetings to schedule and reschedule, and through it all, there had been the niggling worry that this was somehow a plot to strike at the village he guarded.

Now that they were gone, though, he could finally allow himself some measure of laxness, now that everything he had to do was far less urgent.

In the end, the council had voted to allow traders free access to Konoha with minimal tariffs, and he'd approved, especially after he'd seen some samples of goods and the prices at which they'd be sold. And while a good deal of the goods to be imported were bound for civilian markets, there was a lot more that would no doubt end up in the hands of his ninja.

He didn't know how exactly Kekkaigakure's blacksmiths could produce steel wire of such strength and fineness, but they had done so somehow, and at a price that was, all things told, very, very reasonable. Still, he couldn't help but wonder about it. Most of the time, when Konoha traded with other hidden villages, the goods approved for export were of substantially lower quality than the ones that were withheld for internal use. After all, the more weapons they sold to their potential enemies, the stronger that those enemies would be, and so making sure that his shinobi - and *only* his shinobi - were equipped with the best of the best was only the sensible thing to do. And if Kekkaigakure held a similar philosophy, and their export products were of such high quality, what did that say about the equipment that *their* ninja used?

Not to mention that he'd gotten distressingly little information out of his visitors, and, for all of his observations, the only things his Intelligence department had managed to turn up was that Kekkaigakure was obscenely rich, given the delegates' clothing, and some speculation about possible fighting styles. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing that the delegates had not uncovered that much about Konoha either - he had no reason to believe that the

visitors had managed to uncover anything that wasn't already fairly public knowledge.

Unfortunately, the visit *had* brought some unpleasant revelations. He'd have to arrange to send a team to Kekkaigakure to recover the remains of the body of Uchiha Obito - what was left of it, at least. There was also the issue of how to break the news to Kakashi. The man would be devastated when he found out that the friend he thought long dead had somehow remained alive - and had gone rogue, no less - but, at the same time, he couldn't exactly withhold the information, seeing as how Kakashi would no doubt find out one way or another.

He sighed. He really was getting too old for this.

It was not difficult to track the boy she had given her ribbon to, despite the teeming mass of humanity that filled the city. All she had to do was follow the faint traces of her own presence that yet lingered on the ribbon of hers that she'd given him, despite the time and her own best efforts. And so it was that Kagiyama Hina found herself wandering through the bustling street markets in the lower-class neighborhoods that filled Konoha's southern half.

The last time she'd visited the city, she had thought that the boy she'd met was an orphan. The maze of mid-rise buildings that she slowly spent her time navigating through, however, was nowhere near any of Konoha's public orphanages. Naruto lived here, though, or somewhere near, judging from her rough sense of direction and proximity. This was no place for a child to live on his own - even if he'd somehow managed to secure a decent place to live, young humans, in her experience, were entirely incapable of caring for themselves, quite unlike youkai. She'd seen enough human children lost on the Nameless Hill to recognize that much, at least.

As she walked around aimlessly, the occasional vendor called out to her, advertising everything from trinkets to weaponry to fresh vegetables. From time to time, she stopped to peruse some of the

wares, indulging herself in the ability to simply walk around without being shunned. And all the while, she followed that ever-so-faint trail, slowly drifting closer and closer to her intended destination.

It was not until late afternoon that she finally discovered the apartment building that Naruto lived in. Strangely enough, even though nearly everyone she had spoken with knew of Naruto's reputation as a troublemaker and nuisance, no one knew where he actually lived. Finding his home had proven to be surprisingly difficult, especially considering just how well-known he apparently was within Konoha. The squat concrete building was dingy and ill-kept - hardly surprising, given its location in the middle of one of Konoha's poorer neighborhoods. A poorly-lit staircase spiraled up one side, providing access to the various apartments, and a battered nameplate labeled "Uzumaki" marked an apartment on the second floor as Naruto's.

For a moment, she paused in front of the door, listening to the sounds that drifted in from the streets. The shrill cries of farmers hawking their wares punctuated the low rumble of conversation and foot traffic down in the street below. No, this was hardly a good place to live. Judging from the noise, this was a fairly well-trafficked area, and, given the various bars she'd passed on her way here, it would be quite noisy at night. It was strange that a child would be living on his own, and in such poor conditions, no less. Perhaps Naruto could enlighten her as to why?

Hina reached out to knock on the door and stopped, hesitating, her hand hovering in mid-air. This was the first time in recent memory that she'd visited anyone, really. The few times that she'd had company, it had always because Nitori had decided to seek her out for some reason or another, usually bringing some sort of machinery with her, saying something about "stress testing" and "redundant systems," whatever that meant. As a result, she was not entirely familiar with the relevant social niceties regarding visiting others.

If she was correct, it was customary to bring gifts when visiting others, and although she'd initially been unsure about what to take

with her, she'd eventually settled on a set of glazed porcelain bowls - something an orphan would not likely have, due to expense, especially in the pre-industrial society Outside - as well as a copy of *Taketori Monogatari*, which, admittedly, she'd included more out of whimsy than anything else.

Yes, the reassuring weight of the gifts in the basket slung under her arm was still there. Everything was in order. Hina took a deep breath and reached out to knock once again. Her hand stopped just before it hit the door's surface. Did the boy still even remember her? She'd only ever met him once, and even then for just a few hours, the last time she'd been in Konoha. That was six months ago, and she knew all too well that human memory was ever so fickle, whether for good or for worse. To her, six months was merely another fleeting instant in the middle of a long life. To a young human boy, six months could very well be an eternity. That the ribbon had led her to his home, rather than to the sewers or some sort of junk heap, was promising, but for all she knew, it could be buried under a pile of clutter, long forgotten by the rest of the world.

Well, there wasn't much point in worrying about such things. The sound of her knocking echoed through the hallway. For a long moment, she waited impatiently, listening for any response. There was nothing to indicate that her presence had been noticed, no response at all from inside the apartment. She sighed. Maybe she had been forgotten after all. Honestly, it would be for the best if she were - the sheer difference in lifespan meant that any youkai who sought out humans as friends or companions often ended up heartbroken.

And then, suddenly, the door burst open, revealing one familiar blond-haired young boy. "... Naruto-kun?" she said dumbly.

"Hina-nee!" came the shout. She blinked. When had she become "Hina-nee"? She distinctly remembered Naruto calling her "Hina-san" the last time she'd been in Konoha. Evidently, sometime during her absence, that had changed. Naruto leaped at her in some sort of cross between a hug and a flying tackle, hitting her square in the

chest. She stumbled back a few steps from the force. "Hina-nee!" he shouted again. "You really came back to visit!"

"Of course I did," she said quietly. "I promised, didn't I?" She winced a bit as Naruto hugged her to himself even more tightly than he had before. For a young human, the boy was abnormally strong.

"My classmates at the Academy said the ribbon you gave me was stupid and girly," he said, waving his hand around as if to showcase that fact that he was still wearing the same tattered ribbon that she'd given him all those months before, "and when I said you gave it to me they just laughed..." He sniffled a bit. "They said you probably forgot about me as soon as you left and that..." Naruto trailed off.

"It's all right," she said, patting the back of his head. "I'm here now, and I've brought some gifts for you with me as well. Come on, let's go inside. Do you have a caretaker of some sort?"

Naruto let go of her at that, blushing a bit. "Um," he said. "I live alone." He seemed to wilt under her disapproving glare. "It's fine," he said quickly. "I didn't like living at the orphanage and I don't bother anyone living here and Hokage ojii-san makes sure that I have enough money for food and—" Naruto squawked as Hina stepped around him and peered through the open door into his apartment. She was not surprised to find the interior a complete mess.

The flimsy cardboard boxes that food stands used for takeout covered every table within the entire apartment. Discarded clothing lay strewn across the floor, and the occasional book, printed on the thin, flimsy paper that was ubiquitous throughout the Elemental Nations, and bound by string, sat on the ground, evidently having been left open to some page or another before being abandoned. Hina took a deep breath. Beyond the expected smells of old food and dirtied clothes, there was something else, a scent of something that hinted at rage and despair and barely-contained violence.

She turned and glanced down at the boy behind her. He was blushing a bit, staring down at his feet and studiously ignoring her

gaze. "I didn't realize anyone would be visiting," he mumbled, by way of explanation.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I can help you clean, if you'd like."

Naruto shook his head vigorously. "No," he insisted. "I'll do it." She helped anyway, setting her basket down after clearing off a table, and carrying piles of empty paper containers down to the dumpster by the street. By the time everything was finished, Naruto looked a bit guilty. "Sorry," he said quietly, as they sat down at the table, across from each other.

"Don't worry about it," Hina said. "I don't mind. Just try to keep it clean by yourself from now on, okay?" She smiled, and he nodded. "I have some gifts here," she continued. "It's customary to do so, isn't it?"

The boy looked from her to the basket, and then down to the floor. "I think so," he mumbled, "but I don't really visit anyone, so..."

"Here, then." She set down the bowls on the table with a soft clink. They were a deep, vibrant scarlet, decorated with smaller copies of the large green spiral that adorned the front of her dress. "These are for you to use," she said. "I don't know how much you actually make for yourself, but at the very least, you should be able to use them as containers, for leftovers, I think."

"They're really pretty," Naruto said happily. "I promise I'll treat them well." He stood, picking them up off the low table, and headed over to the kitchen area. While he put the bowls away, Hina set the basket on the ground, and pulled out the copy of *Taketori Monogatari*. The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter. Houraisan Kaguya had had a print run commissioned a few weeks ago for some reason or another, and, while the teacher in the village had bought most of the excess to use as schoolbooks, she'd managed to secure a copy.

It was beautiful - hardcover, and printed on glossy paper with full-page illustrations, it looked much, much different from the typical

scrolls and books that she'd seen in Konoha. Judging from his reaction when he saw it, Naruto thought so too. For a moment, he stood there, dumbfounded, before hesitantly reaching out to touch it.

"Can I read it?" he asked. He looked fearful, as if he were worried for some reason that she would not let him look.

Hima smiled. "It's for you." She laid it on the table face-up and slid it over towards him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, sounding unsure. Hina nodded, and he slowly traced a finger across the cover. "Take- Taketori," he muttered, stumbling across the unfamiliar words, "Monogatari."

"It's the tale of the bamboo cutter," she said. "It's quite the beloved story where I'm from. Would you like me to read it to you?"

Naruto nodded.

As she told the story of the old bamboo cutter and the beautiful moon princess and her many suitors, Naruto sat there, entranced, occasionally stretching his hand out to lay his fingers on one of the full-page illustrations that accompanied the text. Honestly, it made her kind of sad to see such a young child so content with just having someone read him a story.

Naruto looked at her shyly when she was done. "Hey, Hina-nee?" he asked, clutching the book to his chest. "How long are you staying this time?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning," she said, looking out of a window. The sun was dipping towards the horizon, and in another hour or two, it would be completely dark out. "I should go," she continued. "I need to find a place to stay for the night."

"Can't you stay a bit longer?" he pleaded. "You could stay here and-

"I have business to take care of," Hina said sadly, softly ruffling a hand through his hair, "and I..." She sighed. "I really shouldn't stay." Hina stood and turned to leave. "Don't worry," she said as she stepped outside, "I'll be back sooner than you realize."

"You won't forget about me, right, Hina-nee?" Naruto asked. He ran out towards where she stood, and Hina obligingly knelt down and enveloped him in a hug. "You won't lose all of your com-pas-sion for me like the princess in the story?"

"Ah." She giggled a bit. "No, I think I can safely say that I'm not at all like that Kaguya." She sighed, and, with a twist of her hand, gathered up all of the boy's misfortune and let it suffuse through her being. "I have to leave now," she said quietly, before standing back up and letting go. She waved as she left. "Good luck until we next meet!"

Really, that boy was all too attached to her. She should have been a complete stranger to him, not a cherished member of his family. It didn't sit well with her. But now that there were official relations between Gensokyo and Konohagakure, perhaps there was something she could do about it, after all. While she had no desire to live Outside, perhaps it might be possible to arrange for Naruto to be brought to the Human Village? It was something worth consideration, at any rate, though. She would have to discuss it with the schoolteacher when she returned, then. And if not, then she would just have to visit more often, especially now that the need for secrecy was far less urgent, and she did have errands to take care of here... It felt nice, Hina decided, to know that somewhere, someone needed her.

And far above her, on the rooftops, a shadowy watcher made note of all that had transpired, and vanished.

Chapter 4

On the Boundary Between Light and Shadow

Cursed Goddess

"Hina Kagiyama"

Abilities: the ability to store and manipulate misfortune.

A goddess that amasses and collects misfortune. It is said that one can be cursed with bad luck simply from being in her presence.

For the sake of protecting the author and the readers, her real name has not been included in this book. Of taboos related to her, there are many.

Do not write about her. If you should ever see her, pretend that you did not. Do not speak to her. Do not even speak about her.

Avoid everything associated with her, for everything she touches becomes forever tainted with the curses surrounding her.

It has been said that she gains power from the misfortune of others. This has not been confirmed.

She is extremely dangerous. Avoid contact with her at all costs.

The disasters she bring cannot be avoided. They can affect your health, your livelihood, even your relationship with others.

If you believe you have been touched by her bad luck, ask for a cleansing at a shrine or a temple.

Excerpt from the Gensokyo Chronicles, 7th Edition

Fire burned in the sky. It flared up in bursts, illuminating the dark forest below with flashes of impossibly bright light, accompanied by the occasional rainbow glow of the shrine maiden's sealing talismans and the swarm of brightly, cheerfully colored butterflies that seemed to follow the Netherworld princess around wherever she went. And above it all, a blood red moon hung low above the horizon, casting its dispassionate gaze down upon the desperate fight taking place in the night sky.

She winced and gingerly held a hand against her ribs. While the introduction of the spellcard rules had served to all but eliminate the killing that had been commonplace a few years ago, she had not been pleased with the way it had ingrained violence into everyday life. The shrine maiden's attitude about the entire thing rankled her as well.

Even if someone were to be seriously injured over the course of the duel, as long as no one actually *died*, then what was there to worry about? Accidents happened occasionally, did they not? And even if spellcard duels inherently favored youkai with their naturally superior stamina and physical capabilities, well, that was no problem of hers. So long as the rules were enforced, and everything was at least nominally fair, Hakurei Reimu had discharged her duty to Gensokyo.

And now that shrine maiden had gone charging off after the one person she considered to be her family over what no doubt were more of that princess's lies. She'd tried to stop her, of course, but for all of her pleas for reason and efforts at barring her way, even on today of all days, she'd only truly succeeded at injuring herself, without managing to even delay the shrine maiden any significant amount.

It hurt. Not just in a physical way, although the sharp, throbbing pain in her side whenever she breathed was a persistent reminder that she'd probably cracked at least one rib in the altercation. No, this was a different kind of pain. It was the kind of pain that came from a sense of hopelessness, from the knowledge that, no matter how

hard she tried, there was nothing she could do to change what was happening even as she watched.

The flames raged, hungrily blazing in large swathes against the tapestry of the sky, as if they sought to burn a hole through the inky void that swallowed all light. The colored bursts of light were getting more and more frequent as well, and the occasional shout and scream of pain drifted down to the ground. And then, one gigantic pillar of fire flared up, and it was over. The sounds of battle fell silent, and, for a long moment, five floating figures hung silhouetted against the moon before one of the five bowed slightly to the others and flew towards where she was standing.

A long stream of silver hair fluttered out from behind her as the newcomer landed. Her friend hadn't come out of the fight unscathed - the large bow tied into her hair had disappeared, and, here and there, splashes of red seeped into her otherwise white shirt. A few of the protective charms woven into her clothing had evidently been torn out as well, as a large chunk of her sleeve had simply vanished, the missing cloth surrounded by a ring of charred black fabric.

She slumped to the ground, and let out a sigh. Finally, it was over, and she could go back to the life she normally lived... A pair of arms enveloped her in a tight hug. She let out a sharp gasp of pain at the way her ribs protested the further strain.

"Are you all right?" Her friend sounded worried, she noted through the red haze of pain that descended across her vision. "Reimu didn't hurt you, did she, Kei-"

"-eine?" Kamishirasawa Keine, schoolteacher and self-appointed guardian of the Human Village, groaned and slowly turned over in bed. The blankets were warm, it was too early in the morning, and surely whatever had brought someone to her door at this ungodly hour couldn't be all that important, right? Surely it could wait until later. Yes, later sounded nice. She sighed and stretched a little under the blankets covering her body, and relaxed again, trying to get back

to sleep. Maybe whoever it was would simply go away and leave her alone, and she could go back to sleep.

"Keine? Are you there?" This time, the sound of knocking at the door accompanied the words, a series of sharp raps that rattled the doors to her modest home. No, evidently the person looking for her was quite persistent - enough so that they were not likely to leave anytime soon.

"I'm coming," Keine grumbled, more to herself than anyone else, before slowly crawling out of bed, haphazardly throwing on a change of clothes. The door quietly slid open with a push, and she looked outside, blinking at the harsh sunlight. One glance was all she needed to identify her visitor. "Hakurei Reimu," she said coolly. "What brings you to my doorstep at this hour?" The events of the so-called Imperishable Night incident had not exactly endeared the shrine maiden to her, and the dream she'd just had about the events following immediately afterward hadn't helped, for that matter.

"Good morning, Keine," Reimu greeted, stepping aside to reveal that cursed goddess who lived on the mountain. "Hina here wanted to meet with you quite urgently, and, as per your previous requests to not let youkai in the village without informing you first, I've accompanied her to her destination here." She smiled. "Anyway, now that my work here is done, I'll be on my way. If there's anything you need, you know where to find me." And with that, she simply turned around and left.

Keine glared at her retreating figure for a moment. How rude. The shrine maiden's normal lackadaisical attitude was irritating enough, and Reimu's behavior on the few occasions that she'd shown up in the village had hardly left a good impression. For someone who was, at least theoretically, supposed to protect the villagers as part of keeping the balance, she showed remarkably little concern for any of the niceties that played an integral part in human relations.

She grimaced. There was still the other visitor to deal with, and fuming over Reimu's antics would not do her any good. She looked

over to where the curse goddess from the mountain was standing quietly, hands clasped in front of her. What was her name again? Kagiyama Hina, was it? There was an entry about her in the Gensokyo Chronicles, although much of what was "known" was simply speculation and rumor. From the way she was standing there nervously, Hina probably wouldn't cause any trouble. No, she could probably handle this by herself.

"I'm sorry," Hina said timidly. "Did I come at a bad time? I can come back later, if you want..." She trailed off.

Keine sighed, belatedly realizing that she'd probably been glaring at her while she was thinking. "No," she said. "It's fine." She stuck out her hand as a form of greeting, and Hina hesitantly reached out to shake it. The curse goddess's hand was bitterly cold, she noted, despite the pleasant warmth of the first days of autumn. "I'm Kamishirasawa Keine," she continued, "a schoolteacher here in the village, as you probably already know. Pleased to meet you, Kagiyama-san."

"There's no need to pretend to be happy to see me here, Kamishirasawa-san," Hina said dryly. "I doubt you are unaware of my ill reputation."

"Nonetheless," Keine said, "you have come here as a guest, and as long as you do not act maliciously, I will treat you the same as any other visitor to my home." She smiled. "Would you like to come in?"

Hina shook her head nervously. "No," she replied. "I think it would be better if we spoke out here."

The youkai seemed serious about wanting to talk - more so, at least, than Shameimaru Aya had been the few times she'd shown up to try to worm an interview out of her. And, well, if the stories and rumors about the curse goddess on the mountain were true, then perhaps it would be better if she stayed outside here, instead of letting Hina into her home. "So what might the problem be?" she asked, finally.

"There's a boy," Hina said, "who I think could use your help."

Keine frowned. "I thought everyone knew about the classes I teach," she said. "At any rate, if the child in question is a youkai, I hold a separate set of classes at Kourindou. If he is a human living outside of the village, then I can arrange for an escort if necessary."

Hina shook her head. "Na- The boy is someone I met in Konoha on one of my trips Outside. He's an orphan, and as a result of the lack of attention, he's missed a lot of the instruction that the other children his age have had." She smiled ruefully. "At the same time, though, I'm not exactly the person you'd look for to teach these sorts of things..." She shrugged helplessly.

"Alright," Keine said. "Let me get this straight. You befriended this orphan in a ninja village, and you want me to go there to teach him?" Hina nodded. "And why exactly," she asked, "did you come to me about this?"

"You're a teacher," Hina said, as if the answer were blatantly obvious. "Everyone on the mountain agrees that you're the one we should go to for advice and help regarding humans." She frowned a little. "Should I have gone to someone else instead?" She sounded honestly confused.

Keine sighed. It was too early in the morning to deal with something like this. No matter how sympathetic she was towards Hina's request, she had her own duties here in Gensokyo, duties that kept her busy enough that she couldn't really justify running around the Elemental Nations for a few weeks simply for the sake of one boy that she had never met. On the other hand, she could certainly understand that child's situation - she herself had not had an easy childhood. Her mother had died at childbirth, and no one knew *who* her father was. With the additional stigma from being a half-youkai, it had been all but a miracle that she'd survived until Mokou found her.

She wanted to help. She really did. But...

"I might be able to clear up enough time to visit," Keine said. "It's going to be a one-time thing, though. With how busy I am here, between teaching and the various administrative tasks that have been pushed onto me, I can't spare any more time than that. To be honest, the only real way I can really help you is if you can convince the child to move here. I believe there have been provisions set up for integrating civilians into "Kekkaigakure," and you may wish to ask about those."

Hina smiled happily. "Thank you very much for your help, Kamishirasawa-san," she said, bowing deeply to her before hurrying off.

Keine waved at her retreating figure for a moment, before heading back inside. She had paperwork to do and classes to teach, but, for the moment, none of that really mattered. Moments like this reminded her why she'd chosen to become a schoolteacher in the first place - not for the respect and prestige it afforded her, but, rather, to help improve the lives of those less fortunate than her. To be honest, she'd thought it was impossible to effect any sort of change on the Outside with what little resources she had, but Hina's visit had brought up some new ideas and a new motivation. And maybe, just maybe, there was something she could do to change things, not just for the people of the village, but for everyone else.

There was a shrine maiden in the middle of the cleared dirt patch that served as the village's town square. Both the vibrant green shade of her hair, so atypical for this region of Fire Country, and her peculiar accent, with its unfamiliar idioms and its quaint, almost archaic feel, marked her as a foreigner, probably from the west, in the Land of Waterfalls or the Land of Grass, where that particular color of hair was common. It swayed in the wind as she stood on top of an overturned crate, talking to the dozens of villagers who'd shown up to listen to her speak, and it shook when she pointed, first up to the sky, then down to the ground, and then finally to the parched fields that surrounded the village.

Hayate snorted. Almost every single time bad weather ruined a harvest, dozens of cults sprung up, promising that, with a simple prayer - and a modest donation - all of the farmers' woes would be solved. Such cults sprung up with such predictability and regularity that checking up on the occasional itinerant preacher wandering through Fire Country was considered an easy mission. Unfortunately, low difficulty meant correspondingly low pay.

As a chuunin with less than three years of field experience, his mission pool was limited to the easier, less well-paying missions, and while the pay was more than adequate to cover his living expenses and the cost of repairing or replacing damaged equipment, it still left very few funds for discretionary expenses. Even though getting the approval to take more difficult missions was simply a matter of time, there were certain things - luxury items such as a higher-quality sword or various consumables such as soldier pills or explosive tags - that he would much rather have now rather than later, and which would make his life much easier.

So here he was, out in the countryside and away from home, taking on a solo mission to openly investigate yet another minor cult that had sprung up in the wake of this summer's drought. He'd done similar missions in the past, and they'd all been uniformly uneventful. Most of the time, the self-proclaimed 'prophets' would show up for a village and solicit for donations before disappearing with whatever ill-gotten gains they managed to obtain in such a fashion. There were exceptions, of course. He'd been briefed on one of the few truly murderous groups before he left, a death cult revolving around some god named "Jashin" that had recently cropped up in the Land of Hot Springs, whose members tended to show up to various villages and slaughter everyone who refused to convert.

Thankfully, there were no murderous cultists here, only a single young woman who didn't seem particularly inclined towards violence. To be perfectly honest, his job here wasn't terribly interesting - observe any proselytizing that the cultists might be doing, and make contact to uncover more information as necessary. Still, he supposed

that uninteresting and dull was better than the alternative. No, better that he complete the mission uneventfully than end up with a situation that might earn him a bit of hazard pay at best, and a spot on the black graven memorial by Training Ground Three at worst.

As he made his way closer, slowly edging into the outer fringes of the crowd, the woman continued rambling on about her religion. It was some drivel about faith giving gods power, and about how prayers and entreaties made by those of unwavering belief would be answered. Surprisingly, it seemed that she hadn't asked for anything from the villagers yet. Now that he thought about it though, the shrine maiden hadn't said much of substance, making none of the false promises that he'd heard time and again from the lips of itinerant preachers. Her name, he learned quickly, was Kochiya Sanae. She seemed to be making a point of trying to reaching out to her audience and projecting an image of honesty, given how she was freely answering questions about herself and her duties as a shrine maiden.

That, no doubt, was at least partially responsible for the large crowd the visitor had gathered. Even civilians eventually became incredibly distrustful, especially after meeting one fraudulent, lying "prophet" after another. There was something different about this woman, though. She seemed to genuinely believe in these gods of hers, and that self-belief only made her words all the more convincing. No matter how disillusioned with religion the villagers might be, the idea of praying their troubles away was no doubt still quite the attractive prospect to the people who faced starvation in the coming winter if the drought continued.

Something about this whole thing rubbed him the wrong way, though. He would probably feel better about the visitor if he could find some obvious scam that this new cult was trying to pull. It was concerning - the mere fact that there hadn't yet been any requests for money marked the group that the shrine maiden belonged to as something other than the typical cult that popped up every so often. He'd done a bit of investigation of his own on the visitor, and, despite

her foreignness, all of the paperwork had been filed properly, and he could see the visa with the tracking seals hanging from the hem of her shirt like a good-luck charm. Everything about her was perfectly above-ground - scrupulously so, almost. It was enough to raise suspicions. Regardless of his own misgivings concerning the situation, however, his job here was to seek information, and not to make policy decisions that were better reserved for those with more authority and experience, and so he stayed put and listened.

After an hour or so, the shrine maiden ended her sermon with a short prayer, requesting that the villagers follow along, exhorting some goddess - a "Suwako-sama" for favorable weather and the revival of the harvest. Hayate elected not to join them, choosing instead to watch as Sanae closed her eyes and held up her hand in front of her, flipping her gohei around to draw the shape of a five-pointed star in midair. She murmured something under her breath, and when she opened her eyes again, there was a glint there that had been absent before.

"Thank you very much for taking the time to listen to me," she said after she finished, sounding oddly happy about the whole thing. "With enough prayers, the gods can give us blessed rain. Stay faithful, and perhaps you will witness a miracle." With that, she brushed off a few requests that she stay, mentioning pressing engagements, before making her way back out of the village and onwards down the road that lead deeper into Fire Country.

He chose not to follow her when she left. The wooden card that she carried on her person would let him find her wherever she went, and he was curious as to whether Sanae's claims about the weather would actually materialize.

Exactly two days after Sanae left the village, a rainstorm swept in from the north, bringing with it an end to the month-long drought in the form of nearly a week of steady rain that slowly seeped into the ground, bringing fresh life back to the parched fields. It came too late to completely save the harvest, but it was enough to ensure that no one would starve during the cold days of winter. Even as the

villagers celebrated the occurrence of the "miracle" and made plans to build a shrine according to the instructions Sanae had left, Hayate could not help but wonder about the rain. Was it truly a coincidence?

Perhaps, Keine decided, as she wandered aimlessly through the street market, bringing Mokou with her hadn't been such a good idea after all. Truth be told, she initially hadn't planned on it, either. When Mokou had found out about her planned trip to Outside, however, she'd insisted on coming along as well, and there really hadn't been much reason to refuse. But now, that choice was, more and more, seeming to have been a mistake.

She'd wanted to explore Konoha during her limited time there, though. She'd asked Hina to leave her with directions for a rendezvous point, and, with that settled, she'd set off to explore the village. It was rare that she ever got the chance to leave the Village for an extended period of time, between her teaching and the other administrative duties that occupied her time. And really, how could she, as a teacher, even try to teach about this new Outside if her only knowledge of it were gleaned from the dry, almost clinical reports that Aya generated? So that meant wandering around in the village, and it would be useful to have someone else with her, if only to help her keep track of where they were in the village itself. Since Hina would probably be off finding that child she'd been trying to help in the meantime, that meant finding someone else to bring along. And who better than her closest friend?

It had sounded like it would work a lot better, she reflected, while she'd been back at home still planning her trip. As it was, Mokou stood out a lot more than she had expected, with her absurdly long, silvery hair, which attracted far more attention here than she'd expected. Although that alone might have been fine, it seemed that she was spending more time sending scathing looks at everyone around them than actually keeping an eye out for points of interest and the like.

As it turned out, she'd underestimated both Mokou's protectiveness towards her and her rampant paranoia.

"You know," Keine said, finally, after Mokou had glared a couple across the street into submission, "not everyone in this place is a ninja."

"And you're willing to trust your safety on that? Because I'm not."

She sighed. "Mokou, we're here to visit and to add money to their economy. If they didn't want us here, we wouldn't even have made it through the gates."

"I still don't trust them," Mokou muttered. "I heard that..."

"I don't care what it is that you got out of reading Aya's screed," she snapped. "Look. All I'm asking you to do is at least *pretend* that you don't think that everyone here is out to kill me."

Mokou said nothing, choosing instead to viciously grind the butt of the cigarette she'd been smoking into the dirt. In a single smooth motion, she pulled another yet one out of a box stuffed in her pant pocket and lit it with a snap of her fingers. She'd had an unopened box with her earlier in the morning, and now, judging from the rattling sounds it was making as she walked around, it was almost empty.

Keine sighed, but said nothing. Mokou had picked up quite a few vices over the years, and smoking was harmless compared to some of the others. The one and only time she'd tried to admonish her for the habit, Mokou's response had been a simple question: "What's it going to do, kill me?" She'd given up on trying to convince her not long after. It had been a difficult lesson to learn, but, in the end, she'd decided that it would be best to conserve her energy for other things - it simply wasn't worth the effort to argue over the small things, not when there were much more important things to insist on.

Like now. "Mokou," she said. "You're doing it again." There was no response. "Mokou," she said again, a bit louder than before. Once

more, Mokou gave no indication that she'd heard. Keine sighed, and drove her elbow into Mokou's side. "Listen to me!"

"What was that for?" Mokou said angrily.

"Are you capable of acting normally at all?"

"You didn't have to poke me that hard," she grumbled, wincing a bit as she rubbed her side where she'd been elbowed with one hand, pointing to the roof of a nondescript building. "There was someone watching us, up there."

It was a plain, nondescript building, almost identical to the numerous others that lined the street that they were standing on, notable only for the fact that there was only one sign mounted on the side, advertising a restaurant that presumably occupied the space inside. Keine looked up towards the rooftop. There was nothing there.

"There's nothing up there," she said dubiously. Leave it to Mokou to see nonexistent threats to her person.

"There was someone," Mokou said insistently. "I saw it."

Keine shook her head and sighed again. It was touching to see how much Mokou cared about her - it really was - but dealing with her sudden attacks of paranoia could be trying. Maybe it would be for the best to cut the sightseeing short and head directly over to the place where Hina had asked to meet them. It could always wait until later, and really, it wasn't worth it if it meant dealing with Mokou's eccentricities. She grasped Mokou's hand in her own and gave it a squeeze. "Come on," she said softly. "Let's go. Hina's waiting for us."

Hina's directions led her to the second floor of a dirty-looking apartment building. She knocked on the door twice, before stepping back and waiting patiently while Mokou paced back and forth along the narrow hallway, her footsteps echoing off of the bare concrete.

Barely a few seconds later, the door burst open, revealing a young, worried-looking human boy. "Are you Hina-nee's friends?"

Keine resisted the urge to smile uncontrollably at the unexpected title that he'd accorded to the curse goddess and nodded. "I'm -"

"Please," the boy said, cutting her off. "You've got to help her!"

Well. Now that was interesting. Hina had been perfectly fine when they'd parted ways earlier in the morning. Just what might have happened in the meantime? Youkai typically had harder constitutions than humans did, and if Hina had either been injured or had fallen ill to the extent that a human who was likely unaware of her true nature was worried, then there was likely very little she could do without using her own supernatural abilities. Almost as if on cue, someone spoke up from inside the apartment. "Kamishirasawa-san, is that you?"

She blinked. The thin, watery voice that had drifted out of the apartment bore little resemblance to the voice that Hina had had when she'd last spoken to her. "Kagiyama-san?" she called out. "It's me, Keine."

"I'll -" Hina said weakly, before her voice devolved into a chain of wet, racking coughs. "I'll be all right."

Illness, then. Keine winced. That had sounded quite painful. And if Hina had somehow fallen ill in such a short time frame... "I'll take a look," she told the child, who nodded and stepped aside from the doorway to let her in. Hina was sitting curled up against a wall in the living room, her hands pressed firmly to her mouth. She slowly straightened up as Keine walked towards her.

"I'm fine," she said, "re-" She doubled over and coughed again, in a series of spasms that shook her entire body. When she sat back up, she took in a deep, gurgling breath and loudly cleared her throat before spitting *something* into the plain white handkerchief she'd

been holding in her hand. "I'm fine," she said again. It wasn't particularly convincing.

Keine frowned. She felt like she'd seen something strange, although she couldn't quite figure out what she'd seen that had been so notable. Hina, on the other hand, was being remarkably stubborn about whatever it was that she was suffering from. "Kagiyama-san," she said gently, "I understand if you don't want to tell me." Hiding one's own problems was hardly a trait limited to humans, after all. If there truly was something important that she was attempting to conceal, trying to force the truth out of her was hardly going to yield useful results. Best to take a softer approach. "But," she continued, "if there's something wrong, I'm here to help."

Hina nodded, before jerking her head towards the doorway, to where the young boy was standing, nervously watching the proceedings.

"Mokou?" Keine asked, giving her a pointed look.

The immortal rolled her eyes, but obligingly led the boy over to what looked like a small bedroom opposite the doorway. "Come on, kiddo," she said. "Let's give Keine some privacy while she does her magic, all right?" The boy swallowed thickly and nodded, though he kept glancing nervously over towards where Hina was sitting against the wall.

The bedroom door slid shut with a thump, but Hina remained silent. It wasn't until the muted strains of conversation began drifting out of the bedroom that she finally unfolded the scrap of cloth clenched in her hand, revealing a tarry mass of black ichor, laced with faint streaks of blood. As Keine looked at it in a mixture of horror and fascination, it slowly dissipated into the air, slowly, almost imperceptibly shrinking as it dispersed into tendrils of black smoke that lazily drifted upwards before disappearing into nothingness.

"What is that?" Keine asked, shying away. The amorphous mass sitting on the handkerchief was disturbing, and not just because Hina

had apparently coughed it up. No, if anything, it felt almost malicious, enough so that she felt the beginnings of an instinctual repulsion.

"It is what I am," Hina replied. "My very being." She tilted the handkerchief, letting the fluid drip off of the cloth and onto her hand, where it oozed into a small pool in her palm. "It is misfortune," she continued. "Misfortune in its purest form, gathered and condensed until it can make its presence known in the physical world."

"The Chronicles call you a curse goddess," Keine said, "and it warns travelers to avoid even the mention of your name, but I never thought..."

"It is not as much of a burden as you might expect," Hina said. "But do not forget that the rumors and superstition that surround my existence came about for a reason." Hina sighed. "At any rate, there is no need to worry about adverse effects from this." She shook her head and raised her hand up to her chin, knocking her head back to tilt the substance into her mouth. Hina grimaced for a moment and swallowed visibly. Almost immediately afterward, she started to cough again.

Keine reached out to her, more as a gesture of solidarity than as an attempt to help, but Hina waved her off. "I'll be fine," she said after the coughing subsided. "This is not the first time I have had this happen to me." She smiled wanly. "I might derive my own powers and abilities from misfortune, but too much can still affect me adversely."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Keine asked.

Hina shook her head. "Please," she said quietly, "just go take care of the child. This illness will resolve itself in time, and we only have a few days here in Konoha. Every moment is precious."

Keine sighed. It was not difficult to see that further attempts at persuasion would prove to be fruitless. She stood up and made her way over to the closed bedroom door, gently rapping on the frame.

But even as she wondered about how to explain the whole situation to that young boy, she could not help but think that the young woman sitting curled up against the wall looked terribly, terribly lonely.

"Where's Hina-nee?" the boy demanded, almost as soon as the door slid open.

"She'll be all right," Keine said. "It's just one of those things that needs some time to go away." The boy looked at her for a moment and nodded, looking unconvinced. "Kagiyama-san asked for my help," Keine continued, "so I'm going to be your teacher for the next few days." She extended her right hand to the boy, who looked honestly confused for a moment, before he finally realized what was asked of him and reciprocated. "I'm afraid that we haven't been properly introduced yet, with all the commotion. I'm Kamishirasawa Keine, and as I'm sure you know already, my friend here is Fujiwara Mokou."

"Uzumaki Naruto," the boy - Naruto - said quietly in response.

Keine gave him a bright smile. "Well, then, why don't we start with introductions? As I've told you already, I'm Kamishirasawa Keine, although Keine-sensei is fine if you don't want to say my family name. I'm a teacher in one of the villages near where Kagiyama-san lives."

"A teacher?" Naruto asked.

"A teacher," Keine confirmed. "Mostly, I work with children like you, though I've had a few other students as well." She smiled again. "Well, why don't we start off with a story? Hina said that she'd already told you one?"

The boy nodded. "Yeah!" he said, sounding much happier than before. He scrunched up his face in concentration. " *Ta-ke-to-ri Mono-gatari ?*"

Mokou let out a quiet chuff. "I'll head back outside and make sure Kagiyama-san's going to be okay," she said quietly.

Keine nodded at her in acknowledgment, turning back to the child once Mokou shut the door firmly behind her. She tapped her finger on her lips, giving an outward show of deep thought. "Hmm. I know! How about a story about a brave young man who rescued a princess?"

He nodded eagerly.

"Well, a long, long time ago, there was a man called Urashima Taro..."

As far as stories went, it was not the happiest story she could have told. No, the tale of Urashima Taro ended not with a blissful, joyous reunion, but rather the bitter tears of regret. The version of the story she always told to her students ended with the fisherman grieving by the sea, his back bowed by the weight of his old age, mourning his lost love. No, definitely not the happiest of endings. There was a lesson to be learned there, though, one that was much easier to impart by parable than by direct instruction.

It had taken her a few months of teaching - a few months too long - to figure out that most young children had difficulty understanding abstract concepts. That was not something that had been easy for her to understand, given her own circumstances and upbringing, and, indeed, Mokou had almost had to rub her face in it before she finally got it into her head that the amount of material that a student memorized and the amount of material that a student actually understood were two vastly different things. But she'd learned her lesson, in the end. Complicated questions posed to children, in the end, were worse than useless. Better to tell stories instead.

To Keine, the story of the fisherman and the dragon princess was more than just a simple story. Admittedly, the sheer amount of times that she'd ended up telling it throughout her life might just be due to simple sentimentality - it was the story that Mokou had spent hours

and hours repeating to her as a child - but it was, nonetheless, a useful tool, both to impart knowledge and to perform an assessment. On the surface, it was simply a story about a foolish man who let his curiosity get the better of him, but there was more to it than that. Thematically, the story was quite complex, with a few central ideas that she felt were important, especially to a child in Naruto's position. While her knowledge of the circumstances and history of this world was limited to what her little information her friends and acquaintances had managed to glean from their few trips Outside, the small amount she'd heard was enough to indicate to her that certain concepts would be particularly important for a human child growing up in such an environment to learn early.

While wariness of the new and the unknown could sometimes be a hindrance to progress, they'd served her well when she'd been growing up, and, in such a potentially dangerous environment, the ability to identify just what should be left well enough alone was incredibly important. If these ninja behaved in any way like what she'd read about the onmitsu from the Sengoku era, then knowing when to stop asking questions would be a crucial survival skill. And while the child might not understand the purpose behind the story that she was telling him, hopefully the story itself would stick.

At least the boy was quite the eager learner. Too eager, perhaps. Naruto seemed to be content with the fact that he even *had* someone to tell him stories in the first place, not to mention that the way he seemed to cling to her every word was... disturbing. No child should have to turn to a stranger to slake that desperate thirst for attention, that desperate need to find someone, anyone, who cared. Given what Hina had related to her about Naruto's circumstances, it was, perhaps, understandable, but leaving an orphaned child to fend for himself simply wasn't something that was done.

Originally, Keine hadn't intended to do anything more than a simple series of tests, enough to determine the boy's level of education and leave Hina with enough resources to be able to teach the boy on her own, but this... this was not something she had expected. Now that

she'd actually met the child, though, it was hard to resist the temptation to stay long enough to make a proper attempt at giving him a proper education.

Not that she would, of course. She had business to take care of, both here in Konohagakure and back in Gensokyo, not to mention the full moon that steadily drew nearer.

It still left a bitter taste in her mouth, though.

A long, long time ago, she'd sworn an oath to protect those who were powerless to protect themselves. As it was, all it really meant was that she'd harbor the occasional Outsider who found themselves drawn inside the Barrier, now that the spellcard rules had come into place and concerns about feral youkai attacking the village had largely dissipated. The oath remained, though, and even though there was nothing to enforce it save her own pride, here was a child who needed protecting. Here was a boy, too young to understand the harsh realities of the world, and yet denied any sort of protection from the troubles and trials that children should not have to face. This child was just the type of person who she'd devoted her entire adult life to defending and protecting.

But what power did she have here, a stranger in a strange land?

Nominally, there was a clear separation of duties between the Military Police Force and the Anbu Black Ops teams. In theory, it was quite simple - the Military Police was in charge of internal security and counterintelligence operations, whereas the Anbu teams dealt with foreign intelligence and operations that fell outside of Konoha. In practice, however, the supposedly clear-cut delineation between the two groups' duties was not quite so clearly defined as had initially been hoped. Occasionally, the Military Police took on missions outside of Konoha or, for that matter, outside of Fire Country proper, while the Anbu often ran their own operations within Konoha's confines. Furthermore, much of the time, it was unclear where the information obtained from the regular ninja forces should be sent.

The standard procedure in such cases was to send the reports to both the Anbu and the Military Police, and, more often than not, those reports eventually made their way through the bureaucracy, jumping from inbox to inbox, and, eventually, to the desk of Uchiha Fugaku.

Reading through those reports was a time-consuming and often irritating task that took up a large portion of his time, but *someone* had to do the job. And while he certainly trusted his subordinates to do their tasks properly, in the end, it was up to him as the leader of the Military Police to understand the implications of recent events on Konoha's security and act accordingly.

And so, here he was, slowly working his way through the thick pile of paper. Most of it consisted either of mission reports or observation logs that contained nothing of particular note. The very last log, though, caught his eye, mostly because of its subjects.

To be perfectly honest, there was nothing particularly questionable in the report, nothing to indicate that the foreigner initiating contact with the observation subject was anything more than what she claimed to be. Even the conversation with the child had been fairly straightforward, with nothing of real content save for a few tales of adventure and fantasy that would not be out of place in any civilian's home. The only real reason that the conversation had been logged was the identity of the child in question.

The Kyuubi jinchuuriki. Or, perhaps more importantly, Konoha's only jinchuuriki, and thus, Konoha's bargaining chip in keeping its place in the balance of power between the various Hidden Villages. Naturally, having such a person be influenced by a foreign entity was less than desirable. No doubt Hiruzen had just been put in the uncomfortable position of potentially having to find a way to warn a citizen of a potential ally away from a strategic asset without either giving away too much information or alienating someone who could potentially veto any possible treaties between Konoha and Kekkai. Thankfully, while he occasionally had to deal with similar issues if policy himself

in his role as Uchiha Clan Head, he'd never quite encountered a problem of this nature or magnitude.

It helped, though, that the conversation itself was so innocuous, without a single thing to indicate that it was anything more than a woman being concerned about the plight of a young orphaned boy. No doubt Hiruzen agreed with his assessment, judging from the lack of any response to this report on Konoha's part.

Fugaku sighed. He flipped through the pages one more time, and set it down on his desk, ready to toss it into the burn bag of sensitive documents along with the rest. Something though, made him turn back to that particular report. He could have just left it at that, could have simply discarded the report as having no other value and left the matter as just one more of the mildly interesting events that served to distract him from the mindless tedium of filling out paperwork, saving him from having a job that consisted of nothing more than hours upon hours of mind-numbing drudgery. But he didn't.

It could have been the mystery of the place - a new hidden village, populated with names and figures unknown to everyone appearing from thin air. It could be simple curiosity about the place that had dominated nearly every single meeting at every level throughout the village for the past few months. But whatever it was, Fugaku took a deeper look at the report. And what he found there was, quite frankly, terrifying.

The watcher assigned to the jinchuuriki had managed to transcribe most of the conversation between 'Hina' and 'Keine', and the contents of that discussion had quite a few disturbing implications. Fugaku suspected that his counterpart in the Anbu had simply dismissed it as a fairly transparent attempt at misinformation, but he himself was not convinced of that. For one, this set up seemed a bit too much for what would effectively amount to a simple attempt at overstating Kekkaigakure's capabilities - too implausible to be reasonably expected to be true by any analyst worth his salt, and with an excessively convoluted method for delivery.

No, as strange as it might sound, the information from that conversation mostly likely was true for the simple reason that it was too ridiculous to possibly be true.

Manipulation of misfortune. The mere idea that an intangible concept could somehow be materialized in a physical form was patently absurd. As far as he knew, every single jutsu acted upon the physical world in some way, either by directly acting on the environment, as ninjutsu and genjutsu did, or by acting on the self, as taijutsu did, allowing ninja who knew the proper techniques to increase their strength and speed to levels far beyond those of an untrained civilian. All of these things were measurable, though, did something that had a palpable effect in some way or another.

This hitherto unknown ability, on the other hand...

Often as not, a mission's success or failure depended a great deal on luck. Usually, the intelligence that a shinobi received on his target was incomplete, with large gaps that had to be filled in using deduction and guesswork. And sometimes, unexpected things occurred. Maybe a roof had been poorly maintained, causing a tile to break underfoot. Or perhaps some guard had abandoned his schedule, managing to be at just the right place at the right time to discover an operative. Like it or not, sometimes the completion of a mission was left solely up to the whims of fortune. And if there was an enemy operative who could somehow twist the odds and increase the probability of encountering some unfortunate happenstance? No, it was not a pleasant thought. Thankfully, the young woman that the reports detailed, this Kagiyama Hina, didn't seem to be a kunoichi, displaying none of the characteristic signs of ninja training that were so difficult to hide, nor any knowledge of the jinchuuriki's watchers.

Most likely, her abilities stemmed from some sort of kekkai genkai, some sort of warped bloodline that permitted her passive control over something so powerful and fickle. It was surprising that Hina had even been allowed out of the village in the first place, given the potential that she carried. While anonymity could sometimes serve

as a defense from unwanted attention, there was always the possibility of an unfortunate...

Fugaku laughed at that. No, someone with such an ability would not have to worry about such things, would she?

He shook his head, flipping the report closed and tossing it onto the pile along with the rest.

It was, of course, pure speculation. There was no way to conclusively determine whether any of it was actually true. Not without actually speaking with the woman, at least.

He frowned and rubbed his chin. Now *there* was an interesting idea. As one of Konoha's four noble clans, the Uchiha clan, and, by extension, he himself, was afforded certain privileges. The benefits ranged from the freedom to negotiate certain economic deals independently from Konoha itself to guaranteed seating during planning meetings, both civilian and military. Perhaps most importantly, while on Uchiha clan lands, he was afforded a certain degree of privacy, a guarantee of sorts that the security presence that pervaded all of Konoha would not touch on clan territory, if only to allow for the keeping of clan secrets. As he understood it, the Hyuuga made use of this assurance quite extensively - even now, the exact details of how the accursed seal that the Hyuuga clan placed on the members of their branch houses functioned were still a mystery.

While, under normal circumstances, meeting in private with a foreigner would be quite unwise, especially under these tense political circumstances... Well, what the Hokage didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Not with regards to this, at least.

He hadn't had much of a chance to speak with anyone from Kekkaigakure during the brief diplomatic visit earlier in the year, seeing as how most of his time had been spent attending hours and hours of meeting debating over something that had been a foregone conclusion from the very start. The brief snatches of conversation he

had had time for had left him with more questions than answers. Not that he'd had much time to talk - the one time he'd managed to hold an in-depth discussion with one of the visitors, it had been a short break over lunch, between tours of Konoha's various landmarks, but it had been enough to instill within him a burning curiosity about Konoha's strange new neighbors.

Speaking with that kunoichi who'd called herself Shameimaru Aya had been quite the experience. Despite the way that she'd flitted from one topic to the next, seemingly unable to settle on a single subject to discuss, she was still quite the remarkable conversationalist. Even though she hadn't divulged much information about Kekkaigakure, he hadn't exactly given up much that wasn't already common knowledge, seeing as how she'd spent the entire time asking about the background and culture of the Elemental Nations as a whole, rather than focus on Konoha itself. In between questions about the history of the world, though she *had* seemed to imply that Kekkaigakure would not be opposed to developing a closer relationship with the Uchiha Clan.

Moreover, establishing such a relationship would be to his clan's benefit. The trade delegation had brought with them quite the array of products: everything from finely woven cloth, dyed in every conceivable hue, to knives and swords made of steel of a higher quality than he'd thought possible. If he could negotiate some sort of exclusive distribution rights involving the civilian members of his clan, that would undoubtedly lead to more money in his coffers - money he could use to arm his clan members with tools and equipment of the highest quality he could find, money he could use to make sure that his fellows would return from missions alive.

A good working relationship could, no doubt, lead to an alliance as well. Unthinkable as it was, there might come a time when Konohagakure would refuse to accept the presence of the Uchiha within its walls. With the current tensions and the gradual marginalization of his clan, there was some possibility, and, no matter how small that chance was, it was still a chance. If such a

thing were to ever happen, the Uchiha Clan would need all the allies it could get.

Establishing contact with Kekkaigakure, however, would require some sort of face to face meeting, however. Sending someone to the north was out of the question - there simply wasn't anyone who he could send without arousing suspicions of treason here. But...

Fugaku glanced back to the report he'd been reading. Who better to meet with than the mysterious visitors that had turned up almost on his doorstep? An invitation for a dinner then, to properly welcome Konoha's new trading partners to the village. Yes, that would do nicely.

And with that settled, Uchiha Fugaku leaned forward in his chair and began to write.

Chapter 5

On the Boundary Between Light and Shadow

"The thing about history is that it's flexible, yeah? I don't think she really understands that, of course. Memory's such an unreliable thing - believe me, I should know. And the histories... Well, those aren't set in stone either for that matter.

"All you've got to do is kill all the scholars, burn their texts, and wait a hundred years, and by then your version of what happened will be the only version of what happened. But she... She's the kind of person to treat text as inviolate, you know? In her mind, well... Books can't be destroyed, simply because there's no justifiable reason to destroy knowledge.

"And maybe she's right. But that doesn't change the fact that other people are willing to do those kinds of things to achieve their goals - not everyone's as scrupulous as she is. So just keep that in mind.

"I guess my point is that not everything you read is true. And even if it is true, it can still emphasize some stuff and draw attention away from other things. Just... Just remember all that when you read something, all right? Who it was written for, and who it was written by."

From the personal notes of Hieda no Aya

For a place that was supposedly hidden from the rest of the world, Konoha had quite a few inns within its confines. The vast majority of those catered to merchants and various foreign visitors, though there were no small number that made their business next to thinly disguised "tea houses". Keine had deferred to Hina's previous experience when it came to finding lodging within the city, and they'd ended up with a room in one of the former. It was clean enough, she

supposed, though the quality of the furnishings left much to be desired.

There was still, of course, the issue of surveillance. Thankfully, it hadn't been too difficult to come up with a solution. For all of her myriad faults, at least the Hakurei shrine maiden took her duties seriously. Before she'd left Gensokyo, Keine had inquired about means to ensure her own privacy, and ended up with a number of barrier seals designed to foil any attempts at eavesdropping.

It had been late in the afternoon by the time they'd left the child's apartment, and by the time that they'd arrived back at the inn, the sun had already begun its slow descent below the horizon, painting all of Konoha in shades of red and orange. Mokou had left to find food, insisting that she stay with the youkai - Hina - in the meantime. In the end, affixing the seals to the walls of the room had only taken a few minutes of quiet work, and so, with nothing else left to do, she'd ended up looking through the brief battery of tests that she'd given to Hina's...

She frowned. There really wasn't a good way to categorize Hina's relationship with the young boy. From what Hina had told her, she'd only visited Konoha a few times before today - certainly not enough time for any child to attach so closely to her. Yet, at the same time, from his words and actions, the boy seemed to treat her almost as an older sister.

At any rate, Naruto had proven to be woefully undereducated. Evidently *someone* had made the effort to teach him, as he'd at least had some very basic skills in literacy. However, that was about as far as his knowledge extended. The boy only had the most intuitive grasp of mathematics, as far as she could tell, and though she had yet to finish grading the rest of the assessment, she doubted his understanding of the sciences or of literature would prove to be notably better.

Still, for lack of anything better to do, Keine slowly continued working through the rest of the papers, marking incorrect answers and

making comments about how Hina might direct the child to improve. It was a slow, tedious process, both due to the sheer amount of incorrect answers and from her lack of knowledge of how to teach the very young. Most of her own students had at least been given an understanding of the fundamentals by their parents, and determining the way to teach a child who had none of that foundation to build upon was no small undertaking.

As she was making a comment on possible ways to introduce the basic mathematical operations, the trail of ink that her pen left on the page abruptly stopped in the middle of a stroke. Keine frowned and scribbled in the margins, but the pen stubbornly refused to leave any mark on the page.

She hissed in annoyance. That was one of the last few ballpoint pens she'd gotten from Kourindou, and with her supply slowly being depleted from use, it seemed that she'd have to switch back to using fountain pens very soon. Unfortunately, she forgotten to bring ink - or extra pens, for that matter - along with her, and so the rest of the grading would have to wait until she acquired some writing instruments within the village.

Keine gathered up the papers into a neat stack and stuffed the entire pile into a satchel where she'd put her teaching supplies, and then sat back, looking over to where Hina had been sitting, slowly folding a series of small paper dolls.

The curse goddess hadn't been particularly talkative, even on the slow journey to Konoha, but ever since her... episode in Naruto's apartment, she'd been particularly reticent to speak. Ever since they'd gotten back and applied the barrier seals, she'd been intently making those things, slowly turning a small pile of paper into a larger pile of dolls. Watching the repetitive motions, machine-like in their consistency.

Fold. Turn. Fold. Turn.

At long last, just as the silence was slowly becoming uncomfortable, Hina finished folding the last piece of paper and looked her in the eye. "Yes?" she asked. "Was there something you wanted to ask me?"

"You are not," Keine said slowly, "at all like what I expected."

"What did you think I was?" Hina asked. "A malicious force of nature, perhaps? Some sort of witch who slings curses around with reckless abandon? A heartless youkai who had not a bit of concern for her undoubtedly innumerable victims?" She smiled, perhaps a bit bitterly.

Keine coughed, her face coloring a little in embarrassment. "Yes, well... *The Chronicles*-"

"*The Chronicles* present the current Child of Miare's perspective on the people and events surrounding Gensokyo," Hina said crossly. "It is a compendium written by a human for an audience of humans. Considering the role you've played in publishing the last few editions, I would expect it to be something you, of all people, should understand." She glowered at Keine. "Would it not be reasonable to expect some amount of bias to be present in its contents?"

"I will admit, I do have a tendency to treat the written word as truth," Keine said. "It is a bad habit of mine, and one I would do well to avoid." She sighed. "As a scholar, I forget sometimes that the books I study are just as fallible as the authors who write them. Moreover, it is difficult to find reliable information about the truth of things due to the circumstances of the coexistence between humans and youkai, especially when I am forced to rely on hearsay for much of my information." A shrug. "Some amount of embellishment is expected when stories are told and retold, and it is often impossible to safely contact any of the youkai in question, which is why the *Chronicles* takes such a precautionary tone."

"It is understandable," Hina said placidly. "But still irritating, nonetheless."

"I understand." She nodded. "But in that case, since we seem to have the opportunity now, if you'd like to provide any insight on your own circumstances, I'll be certain to pass them along to Akyuu."

At those words, Hina smiled suddenly and clapped her hands together, her previous ill mood all but forgotten. "Tell me, Kamishirasawa-san," she said intently. "Do you know why the *Chronicles* calls me a curse goddess?"

Keine shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"I have been told that the first edition of the *Gensokyo Chronicles* to make note of my existence is the seventh. At the very least, Hieda no Anana is the first Child of Miare to make reference to the existence of one 'Kagiyama Hina,' if I am not mistaken. And that is true. In some ways, the seventh edition does, in fact, mark the appearance of my entry within the *Chronicles*. However, it is more accurate to say that the first article about my existence was written by Hieda no Aichi."

"Akyuu's ancestor?" Keine asked, a bit incredulously. "The first Child of Miare? That Hieda no Aichi?"

Hina nodded, reaching up to her chest, tugging at the ribbon that held her hair in place. "The very same." The small bow came loose, and she swept her hair back over her shoulders, letting it fall loosely behind her back. She sighed. "Kamishirasawa-san, do you understand what separates gods from mere youkai?"

"Faith," Keine replied, feeling a little like a schoolgirl reciting facts to her teacher. "Where youkai achieve their existence through fear, the gods maintain themselves through the faith and veneration that is obtained through their followers' rituals and sacrifices."

"Is it not strange, then, that I am called a goddess even though I have no devotees to my name?"

And in truth, the more Keine thought about it, the more paradoxical it seemed. As far as she knew, even the other youkai avoided Hina like the plague, with very few exceptions, and the few acquaintances she was known to have certainly did not venerate her as a deity. Yet, if she truly were a goddess, as the Chronicles claimed, then she should have long since faded into nothingness due to lack of faith. And that clearly hadn't happened, now had it?

"There are," Hina continued, "two kinds of deities: those whose existence was spun into existence by the prayers and wishes of their faithful, and those who already existed prior to their deification."

"Then..."

Hina smiled thinly. "Many, many years ago, when I was nothing more than a simple youkai, born of fear and superstition, I met a human. Out of nothing more than generosity, he fed me and clothed me, and in return for his kindness, I granted him a blessing of good fortune. In time, that human told his fellows of the stranger who'd repaid his efforts with the gift of luck. And as that story was told and retold, it slowly became warped, until it slowly warped into a tale about a wandering goddess who would appear before travelers and grant them safe travels in exchange for a gift."

She sighed and looked up, her gaze distant and unfocused. "And this it was that I ascended into the ranks of divinity. For a time, travelers would pray to me at wayshrines for protection from hazards they might encounter. I granted benedictions to the worthy and cursed those who wronged the ones who begged for my protection." Hina grimaced. "And then, from over the sea, a new goddess of fortune appeared."

"Benzaiten," Keine said quietly.

"Yes," Hina hissed, her voice laden with hatred. "Benzaiten."

Keine blinked in surprise. So far this trip, Hina had been polite and soft-spoken, almost to a fault. Nothing she'd said or done had

indicated that this kind of explosive anger might lurk under the placid exterior, that public face that the youkai showed to the world.

"As that *whore*'s power grew, my influence waned until I could not even hear the pleas of those who begged for my aid at my own shrines!"

Hina sighed, her previous anger gone in an instant. "You cannot understand," she continued, suddenly quiet, "that feeling of frustration and rage that I experienced then, as the boons I had given in the past slowly became forgotten, until the curses I had delivered as retribution were all that was remembered of me." She smiled again, a faint, maudlin sort of smile. "I have had many years to come to terms with this diminishment that was inflicted upon me, but even now, it pains me greatly to think of what I once was."

But no matter how much Hina claimed she couldn't, Keine really could understand what she'd felt all those years ago. Anger, frustration, helplessness... Were they not those same emotions that she herself had experienced, years ago on that imperishable night?

For a while, there was silence, interrupted only when Keine spoke once again.

"I understand," she murmured, laying her hand over Hina's and giving it a slight squeeze. There was nothing more to be said.

It was late in the evening by the time Mokou returned to the room Hina had rented, a wooden slab carrying three bowls balanced carefully on one shoulder. It had been difficult to find food cheap enough to fit their budget in the village. While Keine had brought a good supply along with her on top of the cash they'd gotten from the knickknacks that that curse goddess had sold, a good portion of the money was earmarked for purchases - various cultural items, a few books and scrolls, and supplies for the return journey.

In the end, she'd settled on a small ramen stand, where she'd left behind a deposit and a promise to return the utensils later that night. That the piping hot broth had made it easy for her to test the food for poisons or other similar additives was only an added bonus.

And so, with everything taken care of, she headed back towards the inn, food in tow.

Predictably, there was trouble waiting for her there in the form of a small scroll on the low table in the room the three of them shared, a wrinkled red ribbon bearing a crest that she recognized as the seal of the Uchiha Clan lying on the polished oaken surface nearby.

"A runner sent it up here while you were gone," Keine said by way of explanation, as she laid the bowls out around the table. "It's an invitation, apparently. The Uchiha clan 'cordially invites' us for dinner tomorrow evening. I think it'll be a good opportunity to establish some--"

"I *told* you not to handle things sent to you directly," Mokou grumbled. "You shouldn't--"

"-take the risk, I know, I know," Keine said. "I heard your little speech the last hundred times you said it, too. I'm not some child to be coddled, Mokou. I'm glad you care about me, I really am, but..." She huffed petulantly. "I'm not that little girl you found lost and alone in the woods all those years ago."

"No," Mokou said slowly. "You're not." And that was the problem, wasn't it? "You don't understand, Keine. These people aren't like the your villagers. You've read those reports that tengu wrote up. Everyone here will gladly slit your throat for money, and if someone wants you dead, I can't do anything about it if you just waltz right up into their hands!"

Keine sighed. "Look," she said wearily, "we've been over this before. If they wanted to kill us, they would have done it as soon as we stepped through the village gates."

Mokou just shook her head and decided to let the matter drop. She'd learned when Keine could be budged from the positions she took a long time ago, and now was not one of those times. Really, for someone who studied history, she was far too trusting of humans. Though, admittedly, living her entire life in Gensokyo might have had something to do with that.

As a rule, humans in the Village had little to fear from each other. The existence of youkai made sure of that - infighting was not tolerated, and troublemakers would often find themselves cast out of the village and quietly forgotten thereafter.

Gensokyo's situation, though, was unique. History had shown, time and again, that people from the Outside were perfectly happy to slaughter each other without compunctions. Keine knew that. Or, at least, she should have known. But the habits gained over the course of a lifetime were not so easily shaken off, and an intellectual understanding could never be same as having firsthand experience of man's inhumanity to man.

And if it were up to her, Keine would never have such experiences, though if she insisted on taking these kinds of risks... If something were to happen to Keine, not even the Great Dragon himself could stop her from having her vengeance against those responsible. Not that it could make up for any of what would have already happened.

Mokou grimaced and turned her face down to face the bowl of ramen on the table in front of her. There was no point in souring the mood even further. Keine hadn't been in the best of moods when she'd left - something she'd learned about the boy they'd met had left her quite displeased - but she seemed quite excited about the invitation. And if it made Keine happy, she was loathe to refuse, especially not when this was exactly the kind of business they were supposed to be here for.

"All right," she said grudgingly. "I'll allow it. Just this once."

Keine smiled brilliantly. "I'm glad we don't have to fight over this."

Mokou just shook her head ruefully and lifted up the bowl of broth, taking a deep gulp of the warm soup before setting it back down on the table.

"What about you, Hina?" Keine asked. "Will you attend as well?"

Mokou blinked. When had 'Kagiyama-san' become 'Hina'?

The curse goddess shook her head. "I would go, but I have business to attend to in town," she said softly. "I will prepare a token of my appreciation though, if you would pass it along on my behalf?"

Keine nodded. "Of course."

And wasn't this a strange occurrence?

Keine's attitude towards everyone who could not be considered a part of the village - youkai especially - could best be described as 'frostily polite'. There were a few exceptions, of course - she tolerated that one tengu's presence in the Village for some unfathomable reason, and had a good deal of grudging respect for Yakumo Yukari, but for the most part, she had never been friendly with anyone who could be considered an 'outsider'.

Not that she was particularly close to anyone inside the village, for that matter. At this point, there were very few people living there who she *hadn't* taught, and it showed in her interactions with the other villagers. She was treated with deference and respect - not an attitude that engendered close friendships.

In many ways, it was good to see Keine making some more friends. Normally, she'd be opposed to it, especially because Kagiyama was a youkai, and thus someone inherently dangerous, but Keine seemed happy enough, and she was loathe to take that away. It certainly helped that Kagiyama seemed harmless enough - in temperament, at least, if not in ability.

Well, there was no need to step in. Not for the moment at least.

Mokou sighed and stood up, shaking a cigarette from the battered box in her pocket and sticking it between her lips.

"I'm going out," she announced. "Going to take these back. Keine, don't-

"Yes, yes, I know," Keine said absently, already having gone back to flipping through that pile of tests she'd given to that boy she'd met with. "Could you find me a pen?"

"The shops're probably all closed by now," she said, grunting softly as she shouldered the board with the now-empty bowls, "but I'll see what I can do."

She spent her trip back to the ramen stand in a contemplative silence. *Something* had happened while she was gone. That much, at least, was clear. But what?

Mokou shook her head. There was no point in wondering. If it were something she needed to know about, Keine would tell her. Later rather than sooner, perhaps, but she'd find out eventually.

For now, though, there were more pressing concerns for her to worry about.

When they'd first arrived in the village, Keine had sent out a few tentative feelers to some of the smaller merchant houses, trying to gauge if there was any interest in establishing a longer-term trade relationship. Each and every one of those requests for a meeting had been met with refusals of varying politeness.

Given the general atmosphere, it had been surprising to receive a request for a meeting, and from such a powerful clan, no less.

The Uchiha were, to the best of her knowledge, the single most powerful group in Konohagakure, both in terms of political and economic influence. Ignoring the fact that they were a clan of mercenary assassins, an alliance, or, barring that, an understanding

of some nature, would be greatly beneficial, not only to Gensokyo as a whole, but also to Keine's villagers.

There was some ulterior motive behind that request for a meeting. Keine had taken it as a direct offer to establish a working relationship of some kind, but Mokou herself was not so convinced. Keine had always been far too trusting of other humans, far too quick to assume that they did not have malicious intentions at heart. In Gensokyo, where humanity had been forced to band together against youkai for the sake of survival, that may have been the case, but out here...

For a moment, Mokou froze, staring up at the empty rooftops surrounding the street. For a second, she thought she'd seen someone watching her, though it was hard to tell now that the last rays of sunlight had disappeared beneath the horizon.

She grimaced and shook her head. Maybe Keine was right about her being too paranoid.

His guests arrived exactly at the expected time.

From where he sat at a table up on the second story of the guest house, Fugaku had a clear view of the main gate that opened into the Uchiha clan compound. There were two of them, the ones who his intelligence reports had called 'Keine' and 'Mokou', judging from that peculiar hat and the uncommon hair color, both clearly visible despite the dying light. Even as Mikoto hurried outside to usher them in, he continued to watch his visitors as they waited just outside the gates. There were some things that transcripts of conversations simply could not convey - the subtle signs and mannerisms that said much more about a person than the words that came out of their mouth could only be seen through direct observation.

The older of the two, Keine, was most likely a civilian, if only because her companion, Mokou, was obviously a kunoichi sent along to guard her. It was common practice for merchants and

diplomats to be paired up with one or more shinobi for protection from the various threats that faced travellers, ranging from the occasional group of bandits looking to strip the unwary of their valuables to other ninja acting under orders or looking to cash in on a bounty. It helped that he'd seen the observation logs detailing this Keine's activities throughout Konoha. Ninja didn't usually spend their time haggling with shopkeepers in the marketplace. And while it was possible that she was, in fact, a ninja on an intelligence gathering mission, in the end, the simplest explanations tended to be the best.

Even though he'd invited the entire delegation from Kekkaigakure, however, it seemed that he would only be hosting two guests tonight. The one named Hina seemed to have declined his invitation. No doubt his previous deductions about her status was correct. Truth be told, he wasn't particularly surprised by her absence from this meeting - it was rare enough for civilians carrying a bloodline to even be allowed outside their own village. Delivering oneself directly into the heart of another's power... Well, there were some problems that even luck could not resolve.

It wasn't as if the meeting was without risks on his part, for that matter. Inviting an unknown ninja into hearth and home was always dangerous - precisely why he was conducting this meeting in a separate building specifically used to host visiting dignitaries and other such guests. And while completely avoiding any risk would prevent him from conducting business altogether, taking precautions was certainly a good idea.

Fugaku took a long look at the young woman he'd marked as a kunoichi, tracing the way her clothing shifted as she moved. She wasn't openly carrying any blades, as far as he could see, and, similarly, she wasn't wearing any of the commonly seen pouches used to store kunai or shuriken, suggesting that she'd be carrying hidden weaponry of some sort.

If she was, though, he couldn't find any. Her sleeves hung naturally off of her arms, with none of the stiffness that marked the presence of hidden senbon. Nor did the cloth of the rest of her

clothing, shirt and pants alike, betray the presence of any concealed blades. Furthermore, while her clothing was tight enough to make concealed weaponry unlikely, it was still far looser than most taijutsu specialists would prefer.

This Mokou was probably someone who focused on either ninjutsu or genjutsu, then, coinciding with what the intelligence reports on her had said. With the Sharingan on his side, she was not someone he needed to be overly worried about.

A good thing to know. If all went well, he'd likely be meeting with the two visitors he was hosting today again in the future, and the more he could find out about the people he hopefully would be working with in the future, the better.

He rose to his feet as his wife opened the door, standing up just in time for her to let their guests into the dining room.

"I am Uchiha Fugaku," he said. "You've already met my wife, Mikoto. Please, make yourselves welcome. My home is yours." He bowed, and his visitors returned the gesture.

"Thank you for having us, Uchiha-san," the woman with the strange hat said. "I am Kamishirasawa Keine, and my companion is Fujiwara no Mokou. Kagiyama Hina has requested that we apologize on her behalf - she has fallen ill, and was unable to attend." She pressed a heavy basket into his hands, which he set down beside the table.

Fugaku nodded, gesturing towards the table. "Please, have a seat." He sat down next to his wife, across from his two visitors. "On behalf of the Uchiha Clan, I would like to formally welcome you to Konohagakure."

Keine smiled graciously. "We are grateful for your hospitality."

While Kagiyama Hina's absence was disappointing, he'd half-expected to have no guests at all tonight. And while he wouldn't get the chance to dig deeper into the mystery surrounding her

apparently impossible power, hopefully, he'd at least be able to attempt to gain some sort of a rapport with some citizens from the newest hidden village to grace the Elemental Nations.

"Have you enjoyed your visit here so far?" Mikoto asked.

This time, it was Mokou who responded. "It's been good enough, I guess," she said, not sounding particularly enthused.

While his wife regaled his visitors with descriptions of sites of interest in Konoha, Fugaku concerned himself with analysis. His guests were difficult to read. While it had been quite some time since he'd last invited complete strangers to visit the Uchiha Clan, his position and the constant meetings, both with civilians, other clan members and Konoha ninja alike meant that it wasn't too difficult for him to gain at least a little bit of insight into what other people were thinking. Not so with these guests, though.

Thankfully, Keine, at least, seemed to hold no ill-will towards either him or his wife, which was encouraging, engaging in the conversation with genuine, if slight, interest. On the other hand, Mokou could have been lying through her teeth without him knowing.

It was disconcerting. In general, most of the people he'd met who'd had similar abilities were old - old enough to recognize and quash the visible signs of their own emotions. To find that same ability on someone who could not possibly be older than twenty was surprising.

He made small talk as his servants brought out the food, covering the table with dish after dish. It was nothing of real import, just the typical inane conversation that filled the first half of any business dinner that civilians dealt with. Though he didn't particularly like the almost formulaic way in which meetings such as these played out, it was, at the least, another opportunity to gather information about their enigmatic guests.

Keine, it seemed, was a schoolteacher by trade, and seemed unduly interested in the historical sites in and around Konoha. It seemed to be something more than a mere professional curiosity. If he didn't know better, he'd suspect her of prying for some kind of information. But what kind of spy cared only of events that had taken place fifty years ago? No, there was nothing to be concerned about here - she was, as far as he could tell, mostly harmless.

Mokou, on the other hand, claimed to run a food stand, of all things. Hardly a likely profession for someone whose thin, delicate hands bore no trace of the calluses that years of manual labor would leave behind. She looked soft, he realized abruptly. Her mannerisms had thrown him off initially - her wary alertness and the way she subtly kept an eye on the dining room's exits and entrances spoke of the kind of paranoia that could be learned through the kind of violent lifestyle that ninja, or perhaps, samurai, led.

Yet, at the same time, if she changed her clothing, at first glance, he'd have thought her some nobleman's pampered daughter, a girl who, by virtue of birth, knew nothing of true hardship. He'd seen the likes before in the people he'd been assigned to, either to protect or kill. Pale skin, unmarred by the sun's scorching gaze. Soft hands, with none of the scars and rough skin that came part and parcel of making an honest living.

And then, of course, there was the girl's name.

"I must confess, Fujiwara-san," he said during a convenient lull in the conversation, "I do not mean to pry, of course, but... I am curious as to how a person with a name such as yours might come to be in such a place."

The name Keine had given for her companion was unexpected. Usually, having a name of that form came with an implied claim of nobility. While it had originally been used simply to denote membership in a clan, the tradition had gradually fallen into disuse amongst the ninja clans after the foundation of the various hidden

villages, leaving it a custom retained only by the daimyo and their retainers.

Almost as soon as the words left his lips, the atmosphere of the room darkened. Keine's cheerful demeanor disappeared, replaced by a guarded neutrality, and Mokou seemed to slide down in her seat, her shoulders slumping as if forced down by some tremendous weight.

"It is a memento," Mokou said quietly, "of a different time." She fell silent, and when it became clear that she would not say anything more, it was Keine who spoke on her behalf.

"She belongs to a great family," she said firmly, "and though they may have long since fallen from grace, we keep her name out of respect for what they once were."

Keine fell silent again, and Fugaku realized belatedly that he had touched upon a subject that he should have left alone.

So. A disgraced noble's daughter who'd somehow acquired some ninja training, guarding someone who likely was someone her parents had known. Not a particularly likely set of circumstances, to say the least.

Still, they didn't seem to be lying.

Over the course of his career, he'd developed a sense for when someone was intentionally being misleading. There were a few common tells, a few signs that almost universally indicated when someone was not being entirely honest.

But as far as he could tell, Keine, at least, was being truthful, if circumspect. He had little doubt that the story he'd just been told was not entirely a fabrication, even if the some of the finer points may have been embellished.

So, evidently Kekkaigakure had, at some point in the recent past, had a noble class. But the diplomats they'd sent in their delegation certainly had made no claims of nobility. Perhaps the daimyo had recently been deposed, then, with no clear leadership to take the reins? It certainly would explain the strange lack of definite leadership that the delegation had displayed - for all that that Yakumo Yukari had claimed to be the leader, the others certainly had not looked to her for guidance whatsoever.

In the end, though, it was just another mystery among many. No, best not to spend his time speculating when there was a meeting to attend to.

"So," he asked, finally, trying to lighten the mood a little, "what brings you here to Konoha?"

Keine smiled, the formerly oppressive atmosphere vanishing in an instant. "Business, mostly," she said, "though I intend to do some sightseeing if I have the time." She smiled. "The groups that I represent wish to establish a trade relationship of a more permanent nature."

It was as he expected. Whereas the Konoha and the other hidden villages typically relied on a network of traveling merchants to provide for their needs, Kekkaigakure seemed to be aggressively pursuing trade ties of a more contractual nature. While many of the older, more well-established merchant houses had balked at committing to anything concrete, preferring to buy and sell their product on the open market as usual, Fugaku could see the wisdom in having a guaranteed source of supplies. It was, after all, a simple way to hedge against unforeseen risks.

He was well aware of the various methods that Konoha's ninja corps used to mitigate the effects of a failed mission, ranging from ensuring that requirements for plausible deniability were met to the outright elimination of the 'rogue elements' involved. This was an elegant method to achieve similar effects, protecting the buyer from sudden price spikes or unexpected shortfalls, while, at the same time,

providing the seller with both a stable source of income and a bit of a buffer against bad prices.

The fact that they were looking for a contract was good news. Establishing the Uchiha Clan as the sole party through which Kekkai's valuable trade goods were imported into Konoha would put him in the unique position of having a good deal of both military and economic power. The merchants that governed Konoha's trade between the various Elemental Nations yielded very few good ninja, simply due not having most of the natural advantages that members of a ninja clan held. Most ninja clans, on the other hand, tended to stay away from the merchant's life, driven away by familial pressure combined with a healthy disdain of civilians in general.

The attitude was one which stemmed from times long before the various hidden villages had been established. The Uchiha and the Senju, the two clans around which the village of Konohagakure had been founded, had been wholly independent from the feudal lords who called upon their services, while most of the other clans had been party to that same agreement had been contracted retainers of some noble family or another.

As a result, while the other clans had had their needs met by the nobles who they served, his clan had found it necessary to obtain weapons and supplies on their own. Because of that lingering culture, it was not uncommon for civilian members of his clan to make a living through trading rather than through ninja work, whereas it would be practically unheard of in a smaller clan.

In the end, it was just one among the many differences that set his clan apart from the rest of the village.

Fugaku smiled. "While I would be pleased to discuss matters of business, let us put that off until later. For now, there is food to be eaten, and we would do our chefs a grave disservice should we let their efforts go to waste."

Keine glanced briefly at her bodyguard and smiled back at him. "We would be honored."

The meeting was not unlike any of the dozens, if not hundreds of similar gatherings she had attended throughout her lifetime. Even though she might be far from home, many things, it seemed, nonetheless stayed the same. The familiarity was comforting. No matter how good she had become at divining the true interests driving others' actions over the course of the years, she had never enjoyed conducting business - it was much too stressful for her tastes - and having the old formalities to fall back upon was comforting, if nothing else.

Not that it was terribly difficult for her to keep calm. It seemed that this Fugaku had gone out of his way to try to impress his visitors. While the food tasted strange to her palate - the dishes had far too much in the way of meats and not enough salt and spices compared to the fare she was used to - it was still of very high quality, and it was obvious that whoever had prepared the dishes was highly skilled. Doubtlessly, the banquet had been prepared at great expense.

Fugaku, and, by proxy, the Uchiha, wanted something from her. Or, perhaps more accurately, wanted something from Gensokyo, which she represented. It had been very clear from the moment she'd received the invitation from a party that she had not solicited a meeting from, but this only reinforced her conviction. Yes, there was only one conceivable reason for her to be contacted so suddenly, and now it was up to her to try to divine just what specifically it was that Uchiha Fugaku desired desperately enough for him to resort to such drastic measures.

It was a game that Keine had played far too often over the course of her long life, and it was not one that she particularly enjoyed. She had spent far too much of her life trying to discern the absolute, undisputed facts of the past. To then turn and spend her time concealing the truth, to use her talents to misdirect and deceive felt,

in many ways, almost like a rejection of the long hours she had put in on the various editions of the *Gensokyo Chronicles*.

But in the end, she'd had all too little choice in the matter. The people in the village - the people she'd promised to care for - had always been in a precarious position. Gensokyo had been founded as a safe haven for youkai, with little consideration for the human population, who inevitably became caught in the crossfire whenever anyone with more power than sense inevitably started causing trouble.

She was not proud of many of the things she had done in the name of keeping conflict away from the Human Village. It was - had always been - a thankless task that won her few friends and many enemies. But so long as she could keep the villagers safe, it was worth it. And now, those carefully honed skills would, with luck, serve her well.

"Thank you for the food," Keine said, once the last few dishes had been cleared away. "I will admit that this is not the fare I am accustomed to, but it is still quite good."

Fugaku's wife smiled at that. "Our clan may not be the largest in Konoha," she said, "but we are by far the most well-known, and as such, we hold ourselves to a high standard. When I heard that we were to host guests from foreign shores, I was concerned that our ideas of quality might not match up to yours, but I am glad to see that it was not the case."

Keine nodded. "My home has only just begun to reopen ourselves to the rest of the world. Given the length of our isolation, differences are only to be expected, and I would certainly be a poor guest if I were to refuse to take those into account." A pause. "But no matter how lovely this dinner has been, Uchiha-san, I understand that we are not here simply to share a meal with your family."

Fugaku inclined his head and cut directly to the point. "It was my intention to establish some sort of trade agreement between my clan and Kekkaigakure."

She smiled graciously. "I would be more than happy to work out the fine details of such an arrangement. I am afraid, however, that my authority only extends to myself and the people I represent."

Fugaku hummed thoughtfully. "Would you be able to convey our offer to the appropriate persons?"

Keine nodded. "Of course."

Well, maybe what she'd said earlier wasn't exactly true. Her position on Gensokyo's ruling council in theory granted her the power to at least provisionally approve binding contracts on behalf of the rest of Gensokyo. If she unilaterally made decisions here, though, it would undoubtedly cause friction with the other factions. On the other hand...

"If you would prefer to establish something more concrete here and now, I can negotiate on behalf of my own group. Almost half of all of Kekkaigakure's exports pass through our hands. If you wish, I would be more than happy to establish an understanding of some sort here and now."

It would be good to find allies outside of Gensokyo. Already, quite a few of the more adventurous villagers who'd volunteered to establish trade Outside had been attacked, some by bandits, and others by unknown assailants with significantly more training. Thankfully, no one had died, but in the end, the tengu had needed to intervene in quite a few cases. Having to rely on youkai to protect her villagers, and thus ending up owing favors to the tengu for doing something she should have done herself... It was infuriating, and there was nothing she could do about it.

At least they hadn't demanded all that much for their services. So far, the tengu had contented themselves with a few concessions regarding access to the village, and while she hadn't exactly been pleased to agree to those, they had still been far more generous than she'd expected.

But if she could arrange for traders to come to the village instead of having to risk her own people by sending them Outside, she could neatly sidestep the need to find someone to protect the merchants that she sent out.

She'd have to be careful, though. Push too hard for closer relations with the humans Outside, and she risked upsetting the tenuous balance between her village and the various youkai groups, with potentially disastrous consequences. With the Outside having essentially been declared to be fair game, there were already those questioning the necessity of having a village of humans within Gensokyo.

For once, Hakurei Reimu had acted swiftly and decisively, firmly quashing any possibility of infighting with a few harsh words. That it had required the Hakurei's intervention to calm the situation, however, only emphasized the importance of finding allies outside of Gensokyo. Relying solely on Hakurei's nebulous goodwill to keep the villagers safe would be a spectacularly poor decision. And in twenty years, there would be a new shrine maiden, one born and raised under substantially different circumstances, one who might not be so sympathetic towards the plight of the humans within her home.

"What would your terms be?" Fugaku asked, a thoughtful frown settling across his face.

"I am prepared to offer preferential rates on goods purchased from us in bulk," Keine said. "A sort of 'most-favored' status, if you will. Any transportation arrangements will be left to your clan."

"I have heard," Fugaku said slowly, "that Kekkaigakure had been seeking trade arrangements of a more contractual nature."

"There does not appear to be much interest in that sort of thing within Konoha. It seems that most of the merchant houses prefer to follow the old ways." Keine shrugged. "Given the current climate, I had thought it best to return to a more traditional approach."

"We are not opposed to such an agreement, for certain classes of items especially. There are certain classes of items that are in particularly high demand in our line of work. Blades in particular. We will purchase as much of your stock as you are willing to sell."

Keine made a vague noise of agreement. "That should not be an issue." The Village didn't have true industry - not the way some of the kappa did, at least. What her people lacked in industrial capacity, however, they made up for with artisanry, and now that personal defense had suddenly become a very real concern, they'd slowly been building a truly tremendous stockpile of edged weapons of all descriptions. Most, if not all of it, should be saleable.

Considering that the goods she was offloading were relatively simple to make, the Village stood to make a huge profit off of any deal of the nature that Fugaku was proposing.

But as she slowly ironed out the details of the agreement, Keine could not escape the feeling that there was something she was missing. It was unlikely that been invited to Fugaku's home simply so he could buy knives from her. No, there had to be some other motive behind this arrangement.

But what?

"She reminds me of the old stories my parents used to tell," Mikoto remarked, after the foreigners were gone. "The ones from before the hidden villages were founded."

"Oh?" Fugaku asked, rifling through the basket of gifts his guests had brought. Two gourds filled with liquor of some kind, that would need to be tested for poisons before consumption. A lacquered wooden fan, embossed with an image of some kind of flaming bird. And nestled snugly in the rough paper padding, a small folding mirror, made from flat glass of a stunning smoothness and clarity.

"Like the samurai of old. The competent ones, at least, the ones with their strict sense of honor and unyielding convictions. That lady certainly is no ordinary woman."

Fugaku snorted. "No ordinary person has a noble's daughter as a bodyguard."

Mikoto shook her head. "There's more to it than that, though. Those two... They were far too close to each other for the kunoichi to simply be a hired bodyguard. Too much familiarity between the two. It's almost as if Fujiwara were one of those samurai retainers, the ones raised alongside their charge. But with that story..."

"A debt of honor, then? If we take their story to be true."

"Mmm. Something of that nature, perhaps. But at any rate, you can expect Kamishirasawa-san to hold to our agreement as best she can. She's the dutiful type, you know? The kind of person who takes their responsibilities seriously."

He'd suspected as much, though it was good to have some confirmation. Mikoto had always been far better than he at reading people, and for her observations to line up with his own gave him an additional measure of confidence in his analysis.

"It seems," he murmured softly, "we've stumbled across something extraordinary." Fugaku looked back over the papers he'd signed just a few hours ago. "You believe they will hold to their end of the bargain?"

Mikoto nodded. "There's no guarantees about the rest of Kekkaigakure, of course, but I expect we should be able to trust her to hold to her word, if nothing else. It's more than we can expect from someone seeking to do business, for what it's worth." She shrugged. "The rest is an interesting mystery, but it's not particularly relevant to trade deals, at least. I'll just leave you to deal with that, then, while I put Sasuke to bed. Don't stay up too late - you still need to wake up early tomorrow to meet with the rest of the clan."

Fugaku let out a vague noise of assent.

If the trade agreement with Keine's group held up, he'd be simultaneously be able to cut his dependence on Konoha for supplies and increase his own clan's coffers.

Hopefully, it would give him some leverage the next time he tried to expand the purview of his police force, as well. He'd long suspected that the organization he headed had been founded more as a means to appease Madara than for any other reason. While the idea of having an internal process to prevent wrongdoing by the shinobi forces had been - and still was - a remarkable idea, it didn't change the fact that he had very little formal authority over much of the people he was supposed to police.

It all originated from Konoha's origin as a loose alliance of the prominent ninja clans in Fire Country. When the founding compact had been written, it had contained a number of benefits for the founding clans, both as an acknowledgement of their status and as a sort of recompense for the fact that they were expected to bear the brunt of the fighting, and thus, the heaviest casualties, during times of war.

Although those benefits were a great boon to Uchiha Fugaku the clan head - the meeting he'd just held had only been made possible through their existence - they had proven, time and again, to be a remarkable hindrance to Uchiha Fugaku the police chief. Clans could demand that he remand suspects into their custody, bar access to personnel conducting investigations, and otherwise hinder his efforts without fear of repercussion.

He had always tried to avoid abusing those privileges in cases where his own work was involved, as doing so would undermine his own authority. Criminals coming from within his own clan should not be treated any differently from any other in the village, and indeed, any audit of his records would show that they had not been. And while some of the other clans shared his sentiments about abuse of power, there were many more who did not.

It was a frustrating situation that he had been trying to combat. His efforts at expanding the scope of the military police's authority, however, had been stonewalled repeatedly, first by the other clans when he'd raised the issue to Konoha's council, and then by the Hokage himself.

Looking back, making the attempt while he had also been petitioning to increase the land allotted to the clan for their compound had been a poor decision. He hadn't had much choice in the matter, though. The Uchiha clan had grown significantly since the founding of Konoha, and the clan compound, once more than sufficient to house the entire clan, had become more and more crowded as time went by.

The timing had been unfortunate, however. No doubt he'd overreached a little, but at the same time, the concessions he'd asked for had been reasonable. He suspected, however, that most of the objections stemmed from the fact that very few of the others saw his two roles, as head of the Uchiha Clan and as head of the Konoha Military Police, as separate roles, and instead, grouped the two as one monolithic entity. But regardless of the reasons, in the end, neither proposition had been approved after facing stiff opposition on all fronts.

It rankled a little. More than a little, perhaps. He could tell from what Mikoto told him about the conversations she'd had that many of the others in his clan felt similarly - that the Uchiha clan's efforts on Konoha's behalf were unappreciated, perhaps even resented by the rest of the populace.

Which meant that he needed to make sure this trade deal succeeded. If he could not make the rest of Konoha respect his clan, then he would just have to get enough leverage, enough to bargain with that they were forced to go along with some of his plans.

And if the Hokage persisted in blocking his efforts... Well, now he had other locations to look to when it came to finding allies, didn't he?

"Hey, Hina-nee?"

Hina looked over to where Naruto lay on the floor, haphazardly scribbling in one of the primers Keine had brought with her.

"Yes?" she asked tiredly. Teaching had been an exhausting experience. For all of Naruto's enthusiasm, he was still a young boy, one with a great deal of energy, and who found it difficult to sit in one place for an extended period of time. It had taken a great deal of patience to get her charge to stay still long enough for her to explain what the textbooks were, and how they were to be used.

"Why do I hafta do this again?"

"Have to," Hina corrected firmly. She frowned. Keine had made it clear to her that *someone* needed to impart the importance of the education on the child, and with the distinct lack of parental figures in Naruto's life, that duty fell squarely on her shoulders. Considering that could only be in Konoha for a few weeks out of a year at most, however, she had to do it in a way that he would not forget.

She would just have to rely on his enthusiasm for the shinobi lifestyle, she supposed.

"Tell me, Naruto-kun," she said. "What do you think it means to be strong?"

"It means I can beat up all the bad guys and protect everyone, like the Hokage!" he replied cheerfully.

"And why do you think the Hokage is so strong?"

"He told me before! It's because..." Naruto's face scrunched up in concentration. "It's because we're stronger when they fight for the people they love. And the Hokage loves the whole village!"

Hina smiled weakly. She'd never met the man whose visage adorned the cliffs looming over most of the village in person. She had, however, been in the village for one of his public addresses, and the impression she had left with, that of a leader willing to go to any means necessary to protect his village, certainly had not resembled the kindly old man that Naruto described in the slightest.

He was still a child, though, and she would not ruin that youthful innocence that he still had. "The Hokage's strength comes from what he knows, Naruto-kun," she said gently. "He's smart, isn't he?"

"Yeah!"

"A good fighter needs more than just strong arms and legs," Hina continued. "They need a good head as well. If you can outthink your opponent, you'll have an advantage over them, right? And the strongest people know how to end a fight without resorting to violence at all."

"Like how Hashirama convinced Madara to join him and stop fighting with each other?"

Hina hesitated for a moment before nodding. It was not a tale she was familiar with - one of the local legends, no doubt, so different yet so similar to the ones she knew - but it sounded like its intended message was similar to hers.

"Exactly," she said.

Naruto nodded once and returned to his work with renewed vigor. Hopefully he'd taken the importance of education to heart. It seemed to have stuck, judging from how he seemed to cling to her every word, but a few reminders wouldn't hurt matters any. Keine had left plenty of teaching material to accompany the exercises, but there were other things outside of the purely academic that Naruto had yet to learn.

A few notes about things like budgeting and cleaning would go a long way towards keeping him healthy and well-fed.

"I'm leaving you a note," she said, giving the inked sheet of paper a quick look-over. "Keep it somewhere safe, all right?"

The sound of Naruto's writing stopped abruptly. "You're leaving?" he asked in a tremulous voice.

She grimaced. Human children were like feral youkai, in a sense. Uneducated, perhaps, but not unintelligent. Naruto in particular sometimes had to be taught some of the most basic things - the larger counting numbers perhaps being the best example - but at the same time, he was scarily knowledgeable when it came to reading attitudes and divining hidden meanings.

She'd also found out that avoiding the issue was less than useful. Once he'd latched onto a topic, there was nothing she could do but satisfy his inquiries. "Tomorrow morning," Hina replied. "My visa expires soon, and it would be for the best if I could get a good day's travel in before nightfall."

"Can't you stay here, Hina-nee?"

Hina shook her head wearily. "I have duties at home," she said softly, "responsibilities that cannot be avoided." She cut off Naruto's squawk of protest with a cutting gesture from her hand. "We all have things that we *must* do, Naruto-kun, tasks that we have no choice but to set ourselves to."

"But..."

"And, of course, were I to stay, I would find myself unable to visit in the future."

"But you're not going away forever, right? You'll come again, won't you?"

"As soon as I can," she confirmed. "Within a few months, I hope, though I cannot guarantee that I will be back by any given date."

Naruto nodded glumly.

Hina sighed to herself. Seeing the normally energetic child so down was almost painful in a way. Perhaps there was something she could do to cheer him up? "How about this?" she asked. "If you're done with all of the work Kamishirasawa-san left you by the time I'm here next, and you can show me that you've done it correctly, I'll stay here for an extra week or so, all right?"

He looked up at her with a piercing look. "You swear?"

She nodded. "Of course."

And with that, Naruto's sunny disposition was back, just as suddenly as it had gone.

"It's a promise!"